

## Merchant identities, trading nodes, and globalisation: introduction to the special issue

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Magnus Marsden and Vera Skvirskaja 

### ABSTRACT

The contributors to this Special Issue are concerned by the nature of transregional Asian interactions taking place in the field of commerce. They explore this concern through an examination of the experiences, activities, and histories of commodity traders whose life trajectories criss-cross Asia. The articles share a common geographic point of reference: Yiwu – an officially designated ‘international trade city’ located in China’s eastern Zhejiang province. The introduction to the Special Issue analytically locates the individual papers in relationship to a long-standing body of work in anthropology and history on port cities and trading nodes. In so doing it suggests the importance of considering multiple historical processes to understanding Yiwu and its position in China and the world today, as well as, more generally, for the anthropology of ‘globalization from below’.

### KEYWORDS

Yiwu; trading nodes; port cities; trading networks; China; One Belt; One Road

### Introduction

This Special Issue is concerned by the nature of contemporary transregional Asian interactions taking place in the field of commerce. It discusses the experiences, activities, and histories of commodity traders whose life trajectories criss-cross Asia and harbour in China. The contributors build on the idea of ‘globalization from below’ that encompasses the small-scale operations, informal economy, ethnic and diasporic networks and international migrants. By reflecting historically on the nature of ‘globalization from below’ and the identities it fosters, the articles bring greater recognition to the older and more recent histories of the communities, networks and individuals active in long-distance trade. In this way, they also bring attention to how such actors may often belong to specific communities and networks that have played a role in connecting different parts of Asia to one another over a period of time that stretches well beyond the era of neo-liberalism. Exploring ‘globalization from below’ from a historical perspective highlights the analytical value of recognizing the varying and intersecting levels at which historical processes are visible in the routes, practices and strategies of ‘low-end’ globalization. Such an endeavour is important because it problematizes assumptions that legality and volume are always the most helpful concepts through which to compare and understand different types of commercial activity.

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The diverse lives of merchants or commodity traders investigated in this Special Issue all share a geographic reference point: Yiwu – an officially designated ‘international trade city’ and (known as) ‘China’s small commodities city’ located in China’s eastern Zhejiang province. The city (home to about 2 million inhabitants) attracts merchants the world over to its gigantic Futian market complex. The Futian market houses about 70,000 shops that are conduits for the wholesale of approximately 1.7 million varieties of what are officially classified by the Chinese authorities as ‘small commodities’. The concentration of shops and showrooms selling such commodities has turned Yiwu into a popular destination for entrepreneurial migrants from across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. The city is international therefore not only in terms of the countries with which it trades (the Russian Federation, the United States of America, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan being its major trading partners according to official statistics). Yiwu’s internationality also arises as a result of the settled traders who have made it a home, and transient population who visit the city frequently: amongst the most visible communities of foreign traders are those from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Colombia and the former USSR (Marsden 2016a, 2017a).

What does a study that focuses on a recently established trade city and the rich assortment of international traders who operate out of it stand to offer to scholarship on the interface of anthropology and history? The fact that the backdrop for studying ‘globalisation from below’ is Yiwu – a city of modern hotels, shiny super-malls and integrated ports and customs facilities – rather than the historic neighbourhoods and crumbling warehouses of a city on the ancient ‘Silk Road’ sheds especially vivid light upon the relationship between newer and older forms of inter-Asian connectivity. There are two major reasons, then, why it is helpful to explore Yiwu through the twin lenses of anthropology and history. Firstly, the city offers a grounded perspective on the forms of regional connectivity that are increasingly represented in scholarship and popular discourses in relationship to China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ policy initiative. In the immediate aftermath of China’s policy announcement in 2015, there has been a surge of interest in Asian trading routes and hubs: scholars across a range of disciplines have analysed the historical genealogy of images of ‘the Silk Road’, both in terms of the importance of these to European colonial powers (Sidaway and Woon 2017, 9; cf. Chin 2013), as well as to the changing cultural imaginaries of Asian nation-states (cf. Green 2015). New trade routes and recent political developments have powerfully challenged orientalizing narratives that habitually highlighted the peripherality of the region vis-à-vis Europe and the West. The Silk Roads have re-emerged as being at the centre of global affairs and at the crossroads of civilization (cf. Frankopan 2015).

The Belt and Road policy initiative has however arisen against the backdrop of cities in China (such as Yiwu) that became hubs of transregional trading activities and communities in the years that followed China’s economic liberalization. As Huaichuan Rui explores in detail in her article in this Special Issue, Yiwu rose to prominence as a trading node for foreign merchants from the early 1990s, making use of, and expanding, transport infrastructure built under the planned economy. Other Chinese cities have also seen the emergence of markets that foreign merchants visit to purchase wholesale commodities for export such as those in Guangzhou, Wenzhou and Beijing. Yet the scale of Yiwu’s Futian market gives it a reputation as the world’s ‘stock town’ (Ruiz-Stovel 2010, 51), ensuring that the city’s trade is of central significance to its social and economic dynamics. As

Rui also documents, however, questions hang over Yiwu's future. There is pressure from the central government to shift the basis of China's exports from the type of affordable commodities purveyed in Yiwu to high quality goods. Policy makers are also concerned by the ongoing importance of 'informal' financial transactions to Yiwu's trading relations with the world. Finally, policy initiatives launched by local and national authorities (such as a growing emphasis on E-commerce) suggest that the trading practices associated with Yiwu's foreign traders are regarded by officials as outdated and unsustainable. Yiwu thus occupies an important place in the modern history of 'the Silk Road' but it is also undergoing significant transformation as a result of the Belt and Road initiative. Now is a uniquely important moment to analyse the city's transformations through time and its role in wider, global processes.

A second way in which scholarship on the interface of anthropology and history stands to benefit from a detailed treatment of Yiwu and its traders arises from the ways in which they illuminate important historical aspects of 'globalization'. It is tempting to treat Yiwu and comparable settings within the framework of 'translocality' (Appadurai 1996) or, alternatively, as a significant 'stop' along people's many and diverse transnational routes (cf. Sinatti 2009, 63). Such approaches, however, dwell on routes that are produced by recent forms of globalization and the expressions of neo-liberal capitalism with which they are entwined. However, while for many Chinese Yiwu is thought of as an embodiment of the somewhat romanticized 'Zhejiang spirit' with its grass-roots capitalism (Ruiz-Stovel 2010, 50; 52–53), the contributions to this Special Issue suggest that Yiwu can also be seen as an historic place that is a source of belonging and identity-making for the diverse groups who live in and visit the city.

Analysing the city from a perspective that treats globalization as a one-dimensional product of economic liberalization would suggest that Yiwu has few if any insights to offer about understanding historic forms of commerce, mobility, and trade. A great deal has indeed been written in recent years on the opening of China's economy from the mid-1980s onwards, and the effects that this has had on its people and their livelihoods.<sup>1</sup> An extensive body of work also exists on the new markets for Chinese goods that arose in the context of structural readjustment, economic globalization and the emergence of neo-liberal forms of economy.<sup>2</sup> More recently, social scientists have also turned their attention towards the experiences of international migrants (often from 'the Global South') in Chinese cities. Many such migrants initially moved to China as foreign students and in connection with their trading activities, often conducted at a very small scale (Matthews 2011; Gilles 2015). (And Yiwu on par with global cities such as Beijing and Shanghai also has its own specialized office for foreigners, e.g. Pieke 2014). Ethnographic studies of migrants to China has therefore been pivotal in the emergence of a body of literature that focuses on 'globalization from below' (Matthews et al. 2012). This term is now widely used to distinguish high-end globalization and its transnational corporations from the 'transnational flow of people and goods' that involves 'relatively small amounts of capital and informal often semi-legal or illegal transactions' (Mathews and Alba Vega 2012, 1).

The contributors to this Special Issue build on these important insights but also emphasize the analytical value of recognizing the varying and intersecting levels at which historical processes are also visible in 'globalization from below'. The collective findings of scholars involved in the project on which the articles in this Special Issue are based demonstrate, indeed, that rarely can the skills people display in the field of commerce

be simplistically thought of in terms of either a manifestation of neoliberal entrepreneurialism or as the responses of peripheral economic actors to formal expressions of economic globalization. Such skills are often conceived of by traders themselves as being embedded in the historical experiences of the communities, networks and settings within which they have emerged. With the aim of bringing greater attention to the historical context that has informed the activities, identities and ideologies of traders, the individual papers dissect the multidimensional types of social relationships, economic practices, trading networks and routes that Yiwu hosts; they also assess the role that the city, and those who live and work there, have played in stimulating, sustaining and nourishing these.

In the Introduction to the Special Issue we contextualize the studies of particular trading groups and networks active in Yiwu that follow in relationship to scholarly work on the historical dynamics of trade, trading nodes (especially port cities), routes and trading diasporas/networks. By doing so, we aim to move beyond approaches that romanticize the commercial dynamic of settings such as Yiwu as the remnants of historical Silk Road cultures, as well as those that suggest comparisons across historical periods have little to offer in the understanding of apparently hyper-modern commercial cities. In this way we emphasize the value that historically grounded studies of trading communities and trading nodes have for understanding the global economy as well as the geopolitical and social imaginations it stimulates today.

## Trading nodes in anthropology and history

Trading cities have for long captured the imagination of historians and anthropologists, who have deployed such contexts in order to think about critical aspects of culture and society. One theme to emerge from these works concerns the insights that trading nodes offer into the relationship between centre and periphery. Ibn Khaldun – the fourteenth century North African historian considered by many as being an early exponent of anthropological theory – in his approach to the study of the Arab world, distinguished between urban centres of trade and learning and their rural, tribal hinterlands. For Khaldun, these two types of setting were involved in a cyclical relationship with one another. As our opening remarks suggest, Yiwu's status as a central node of China's international export economy is itself in a state of transition: pressure within China to 'upgrade' product quality, regulate financial transactions, and promote the development of 'smart cities' suggests that from the perspective of policy-makers and the state, Yiwu may increasingly appear as a hard-to-govern hinterland as opposed to a commercial node of central importance to economic planning and urban development.

The analysis of trading nodes has also played a central role in anthropological debates about social and cultural heterogeneity, and its relationship to the economy and state power. Furnival's (1948; cf. Bayly 2003) notion of the 'plural society' thus arose from a consideration of Rangoon in Burma and the role that colonial forms of political economy played in the emergence of the ethno-linguistically diverse city. Many studies built on Furnival and analysed how in port cities such as Malacca and Singapore plural societies emerged at the intersection of urban life and colonial political economy (cf. Barth 1983). More recently, anthropologists working in established and historic trading cities – ranging from Odessa on the Black Sea to Marseille and Thessaloniki on the Mediterranean as well as ports on the shores of the Western Indian Ocean – have found such settings

compelling sites for sharpening theoretical understanding of ‘cosmopolitanism’ (for example Simpson and Kresse 2007; Stroux 2008; Grant 2010; Humphrey 2012; Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012; Green 2016; Marsden 2017b). Fewer studies have explored the patterns of sociality and mobility that define distinctly modern commercial nodes. Such contexts tend to be considered by anthropologists as important for the insights that they reveal into new configurations of politics and economics fashioned in the era of globalization. It is, however, analytically productive to compare the social-economic dynamics of Yiwu to work by anthropologists and historians on historic trading centres.

Scholars have shown how the historic dynamics of urban centres and cultural models of ‘working together’ that are of significance to long-distance commercial relations reveal much about the long-term fortunes of the multiple polities within which such centres are embedded.<sup>3</sup> Similarly to the present-day notion of translocality and its disassociation from the nation-state’s sovereignty (Appadurai 2003), from the perspective of the polity and its ruling elites, trading centres are frequently regarded in highly ambiguously terms. Trading nodes bring capital that enables the strengthening, expansion and extension of state power but they are also widely regarded by political elites as dangerous sites of interaction between the subjects of multiple polities and jurisdictional orders, thereby often making them testing grounds for stringent forms of policing and control. Port cities enjoying privileges as free ports (*porto franco*) and arenas of vibrant cultural exchange are particularly liable to such tensions.

The vexed relationship of centres of political power, on the one hand, and commerce, on the other, frequently threatens to undermine the latter’s established and recognized position in the fluid worlds of mobile merchants. Historians have documented these processes in the context of many different polities, ranging from peripheral yet resource-rich fiefdoms (for example Burton 1993) to the great intra-imperial trading centres that played a role in the making and breaking of the fortunes of large swathes of the global economy (Green 2011). The maritime port city has, moreover, offered scholars unique insights into the nature of the wider processes within which such sites are embedded. Green has undertaken an ambitious comparative analysis of Bombay and Barcelona with the aim of assessing how far it is empirically helpful to talk of their being distinct Indian Ocean and Mediterranean ‘worlds’ (Green 2013). On the basis of a comparative analysis, Green argues that significant commonalities between them point to the emergence of a global political economy rather than distinct Oceanic worlds.

It has, of course, not only been colonial and imperial elites who have recognized the possibility that maritime trading ports offer for apparently unregulated forms of political, religious, economic, and social life. Trading centres are widely vilified but also romanticized as ‘ungoverned spaces’ in which various groups – from mafias and criminal gangs to religious movements and sexual dissidents – go about their business in a more open fashion than in self-styled centres of power and learning. This aspect of life in trading nodes has meant that such settings occupy an important place in the cultural imaginations of many societies. Babel’s (2016) short stories about pre-Soviet Odessa’s Jewish quarter offer a case in point. In more recent times, Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis Trilogy* have sought to capture the dynamic and globally connected environments of trading centres and hubs, focusing on intimate depictions of peaks and troughs in the fortunes of merchants, labourers, seafarers, and officials whose lives are intricately interwoven. It is important to remember however that these forms of mixing and cosmopolitanism have often



been short lived – as is illustrated in the pogroms of Jews in Odessa in 1904 (Humphrey 2012; cf. Green 2011). Analytically, anthropologists have thus deployed the term ‘post-cosmopolitan’ to bring attention to the fact that against the imprint of urban violence the city’s ‘core’ inhabitants and international trading communities often continue to emphasize their purported openness to, and tolerance of, cultural difference (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012; Skvirskaja 2014; Marsden 2017b). The literature in both history and anthropology attests then to the fragile nature of cosmopolitanism in places where people deal with heterogeneity as a matter of fact (see for example also Driessen 2005; Gekas 2009 on Mediterranean port-cities). Indeed, in the face of histories of conflict and violence, what is striking is the historic durability of images of cosmopolitan openness in shaping the identities of people living in such settings, and the ways in which such settings are themselves viewed as sites of mixing by the outside world.

How far if at all is it helpful to compare a modern commercial centre such as Yiwu with historic trading node? Much does make Yiwu a categorically different type of city from maritime port cities such as Odessa, Marseille and Bombay: far from rising to commercial prominence as a result of its ability to benefit from imperial frontiers, for example, Yiwu appears at first sight to be squarely positioned within the Chinese nation-state. Moreover, while the city is officially a ‘port city’ – Yiwu was listed as a dry port city during the 69th session of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in 2013 – it is an in-land or ‘dry port’ rather than maritime trading hub.

Yet, treating Yiwu only as a modern-day logistical centre (cf. Pliez 2015) rather than a historic trading node, narrows the analytical possibilities that ethnographic work in this type of setting raises. The articles in this Special Issue collectively document that it is the multiple histories that international traders bring to Yiwu that shape the kind of node the city is; and that there is therefore a cultural and emotional life to Yiwu that is not captured by characterizations of the city as a ‘capitalist supermarket’. The articles also show that the economic activities that have contributed to Yiwu’s prominence can only be understood in relation to geopolitical shifts and tensions in the world over the past thirty years.

Moreover, as several contributions demonstrate (see especially Anderson and Ibanez Tirado), many merchants, far from seeing Yiwu as an enormous supermarket (a la Augé’s (1992) ‘nonplace’), are conscious that their own biographies (past and to an extent future), particular histories and tastes are intertwined with the city’s development and are integral to the practices and politics of ‘place-making’. Put differently, various (national) communities of traders comprise mobile ‘partial societies’ (cf. Ho 2017) that are essential for Yiwu’s social reproduction. It is thus commonplace to hear foreign merchants in Yiwu (both visitors and residents) remarking that they and the city or its enterprises have ‘grown up together’; and that the city owes its development to their (and other foreigners’) presence and activities.

For many foreign visitors, ‘trade’ occupies only one side of their activities in Yiwu. The number of restaurants and cafes in the city, not to mention several large ‘foot massage parlours’ and night clubs, underscore the extent to which Yiwu is a site of leisure and tourism as well as commerce. Indeed, many who visit Yiwu treat the city as a node in international touristic circuits: for a few Russians, the city might be the first and only experience of China; an Afghan based in Odessa might travel on from Yiwu to the southern Chinese island of Sanya for a beach holiday; Syrians travel to Malaysia for English-language courses,



while ‘Bukharans’ located in the Arabian Peninsula combine a trip to Yiwu with taking their family members for health checks in India. In this way, Yiwu’s foreign visitors entertain a conception of the city as an internationally connected urban milieu that is shaped and reshaped in relation to specific cultural tastes and trajectories.

In light of the tendency for anthropologists to focus on established and historic trading centres rather than explore more ephemeral, small-scale, and rapidly shifting trading nodes, analysing Yiwu in relationship to historical literature on commercial centres raises several comparative lines of inquiry. Diana Ibanez Tirado (this volume) brings attention to the ways in which groups of traders from Central Asia in Yiwu position themselves in relationship to other groups active in the city. Ibanez Tirado shows how these traders argue that commerce is a part of their culture and upbringing – this marks them off from newcomers to trade who are merely the beneficiaries of corrupt regimes and have little or no appreciation of the skills associated with trade. The Uzbek traders from the Central Asian Republic of Tajikistan with whom Ibanez Tirado spent time in Yiwu reside in an area of the city (Changchun) in which individuals from different communities that have long interacted with one another in Sino-Eurasian trade (Uighurs, Siberian Russians, Kazakhs and Uzbeks) tend to be based. This points to the spatial relocation of historic social relationships associated with commerce away from China’s Central Asia frontier to the modern setting of the Yiwu International trade city. If the characterization of Yiwu as a logistics hub appears to reflect the city’s modern development, this way of approaching Yiwu and those who work in the city also looks far too simplistic from the point of view of the international traders who are based there.

### **Beyond globalization: historicizing trading communities, groups and networks**

There is a notable discrepancy in the countries that statistics record as being the principal destination for commodities purchased in Yiwu (that is the Russian Federation, the USA, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan), and the backgrounds of Yiwu’s settled and transient population of traders (Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Columbia). This discrepancy reveals two aspects of Yiwu’s relationship with the wider world. First, traders operating from the city specialize in the transportation of commodities across national boundaries after having exported them out of China. Second, Yiwu is a home to substantial international communities from regions of the world that have been characterized by political violence and instability over the past decades. As Anderson and Marsden’s contributions show, Yiwu’s Syrians, Iraqis, Yemenis, Afghans and also Ukrainians in no simple sense seek ‘refuge’ in Yiwu.

If trading nodes have long held an appeal to anthropologists, the same can also be said of the long-distance trading community, network, or group. While anthropologists are frequently taken to task for having produced overly bounded conceptions of ‘traditional society’ during the heyday of the discipline’s foundational period, there were, in fact, excellent and nuanced studies of communities that engaged in long-distance trade (for example Hill 1966; Cohen 1971). More recently, the anthropology of the post-Soviet world has brought attention to the activities of traders and entrepreneurs from Kiev to Buryatia. Such traders operate at a great many scales – from suitcase to container – and have re-entered worlds of commerce, mobility and exchange after a substantial period of

disconnect that resulted from the Soviet Union's command economy (for example Humphrey 2002, 2018).

Another key thematic focus of the Special Issue concerns, then, the importance of historicizing the nature and activities of long-distance merchants and trading networks. On the one hand, there has been a rising interest among anthropologists in the role played by particular groups in long-distance trade. Yet there has been a tendency to emphasize the importance of cultural factors in explaining the success or otherwise of these groups, at the expense of analysing how a specific interplay of historical factors has shaped such processes (for example Werbner 1999). An analysis of the specific historical trajectories of trading communities and networks, as well as concomitant ideologies and the nodes that have been important to their activities, as several contributions in this volume suggest, reveal a great deal about the role they have played in forging various forms of transregional connectivity. On the other hand, the contributions also explore the wider implications for anthropological theory of working with the type of mobile, dynamic, and geographically diverse groups and individuals who are a visible feature of life in Yiwu.

Building on Ho's notion of 'mobile society' (Ho 2017; cf. Markovits 2000; Markovits, Poucheпадas, and Subrahmanyam 2003; Cheuk 2015), Marsden's chapters explores the working of history at various levels in his study of Afghanistan's Central Asian émigré merchants who connect Yiwu to Saudi Arabia. This trading community is associated historically with the activities of mobile Bukharan traders in China, India and Russia, especially between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. More saliently, however, Marsden also traces the international commercial activities of traders identifying themselves with this group over the past fifty years. The case study brings recognition to the extent to which trading networks operating in Yiwu are often not simply a phenomenon that arose in the context of China's decision to enter the World Trade Organisation, but rather complex social formations established over years if not decades of commercial activity.

Historians have sought to identify and define different types of long-distance trading communities. Curtin's study stimulated a great deal of work on the importance of diasporas formed as result of political flight in the emergence of long-distance trade (Curtin 1984). Recently, Curtin's work has been challenged by historians who suggest that he under-emphasised the role played by commercial motive in the development of long-distance trading networks and communities (for example Aslanian 2014). Indeed, by placing conceptual emphasis on displacement from an authentic 'homeland', the notion of 'diaspora' makes recognition of the inherently partial and geographically distributed nature of 'mobile societies' harder to grasp. Historians have, in turn, debated the extent to which such communities of cross-cultural traders can be thought of as 'middleman' minorities (Bonacich 1973): for some, this term captures the extent to which the skills of such groups were required to act as the go-betweens of various power-holders; other scholars have suggested that this approach undermines the role played by trading networks in shaping their own economic spheres (for example Marsden 2016b).

A further area of debate within this body of scholarship concerns the relationship of trading communities to political processes. Treating trading networks as merely the go-betweens of holders of power and authority has often led to the assumption of their inherently apolitical position. This perspective has been questioned by the work of historians who have shown that diasporic traders were active participants in the societies in which

they worked (Subrahmanyam 1992) and that the very thesis of ‘the apolitical trader’ is itself based on a narrow definition of ‘the political’. In particular there has been a move away from exploring how far trading networks depended on influencing or accommodating themselves to state power to asking how such groups and individuals arbitrated between different political, linguistic and cultural orders (Herzog 2016). Historical work on trading networks and diasporas in the British Empire of the nineteenth-century is increasingly recognizing the important if informal diplomatic positions that these actors occupied, often for the multiple empires of which they were the subjects (Alavi 2015; Brophy 2016; Ahmed 2017; Yolaçan forthcoming). By contrast, in the Russian Empire, imperial subjects who did not belong to well-established, well-reputed or preferentially treated trading networks or diasporas (for example Germans) were often excluded from high profile political life and treated as suspect by authorities, even if they actively participated in local politics, and also conservatively endorsed the political positions of Russia’s imperial authorities.<sup>4</sup>

A consideration of the political participation of trading communities highlights how inadequately the historical legacy of long-distance trading networks is captured if thought of in relationship to the economic domain alone. Indeed, scholarship increasingly recognizes that what is interesting about mobile merchants and their networks is not necessarily their distinction from settled communities. Rather, trading networks helped to produce individuals who rose to significance at historical junctures in which many people were on-the move, be in the form of migrants, refugees, traders, scholars, or sojourners (Meyer 2014, 5). It is also important, in short, to take into account the influence of mobile trading groups on other mobile and migrant communities sharing similar arenas of travel.

These mobile and migrant communities, and the settings in which they thrive, appear especially visible and vibrant not only at the geographical frontiers of different realms but also on the temporal frontiers of different historical eras. As Sood (2016) has explored in his discussion of an Islamic Eurasian arena of exchange in the eighteenth century, such temporal frontiers often constitute ‘pivotal moments in history’ that brim with ‘unscripted possibilities’ and bridge ‘multiple transitions’ between different kinds of capitalism, governance, and globalization (Sood 2016, 12). Anthropologists and historians have documented the emergence of commercial practices and networks in the temporal frontier that marks the collapse of the Soviet Union and the gradual incorporation of its successor states into the world international state system (for example Karrar 2013, 2016; Mostowlansky 2017). There is growing recognition that such commercial structures did not merely arise to the surface during the period of postsocialist ‘transition’ (Kandiyoti 1999; Humphrey 2002): they have also become increasingly rigid features of the political and economic environment themselves. As several articles in this Special issue attest (see Anderson, Marsden, Skvirskaja), the influence that some individuals and business, which arose in these circumstances, now hold raises questions about the range of practices, temporalities and ideologies that the notion of ‘globalization from below’ is able to capture fully. Skvirskaja, for instance, discusses Russian traders operating in China and focuses on the transformation of a ‘typical’, individual actor of ‘globalization from below’ – a post-Soviet transnational ‘suitcase trader’ (chelnok) – into a corporation with headquarters in Russia and Yiwu. While a culture of mistrust continues to dominate Russians’ operations in Yiwu and undermines the development of Russian traders’ wide-spread encompassing

commercial networks, it also encourages new forms of commercial organization. The case study of a major Russian wholesale business dealing in small commodities furthermore illustrates how innovative practices rely on ideological conformity with the patriotic traditionalist agenda of Putin's Russia. They do so by 'bridging' a historical rupture between the ethics of the conservative pre-Soviet Russian merchant and the post-Soviet trader as well as producing a continuous ideological space between Russia and China via the Corporation's mobile founder-trader and manpower.

Paul Anderson's contribution, in turn, concerns the activities of Syrian merchants from the city of Aleppo in Yiwu. On the one hand, Anderson points to the importance that ruptures in the global economy have played in the global extension of Syrian trading networks, showing how the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in new markets for Syrian traders in Central Asia and Russia. The availability of Chinese credit in the post global crisis environment of 2009 made possible Aleppo's emergence as a wholesale hub for both a post-Soviet and a trans-Asian Islamic ecumene, and a node for the re-export of Chinese commodities. In this sense, an understanding of the importance of Yiwu to Syria requires contextualization in geopolitical processes that have unfolded in West Asia over the course of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the activities of these Syrian merchants has also been effected in major ways by the military conflict in Syria, contributing to the rise of a new type of trader able to trade between China and Syria and, moreover, move between warring parties in Syria in the context of ongoing violence.

How far are the legacies of such groups – in realms ranging from trade and economy to politics, identity and subjectivity – and the oft remarkable individuals they threw up best thought of as marking the end of one era and the emergence of a new one? Alternatively, do the activities and thinking of such commercial groups and individuals hold insights into better understanding the shape of things to come? These are questions that are especially prescient in today's context as geopolitical dynamics increasingly focus on the tensions and shifting boundaries that demarcate the 'zones of influence' of the 'great powers' along the new Silk Roads. As the contributions to this Special Issue seek to show, trading nodes such as Yiwu offer a unique vantage point for both looking back over transformations in the interconnected nature of the global economy, and theorizing the implications these are likely to have for future generations of people who are part of, or effected by, long-distance networks as well as the nodes in which these coalesce.

## Notes

1. For an excellent overview of this body of literature (see Westad 2011).
2. See, for example, (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2009; Kaminski and Mitra 2012; Kovacs 2015).
3. See, for example, Aslanian (2014) on the significance of New Julfa and the Armenian community there for the fortunes of Safavid Iran. Russian.
4. For a comprehensive discussion of trade and merchants in imperial Russia, (see Monahan 2015).

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## Yiwu: Historical transformation and contributing factors

Huaichuan Rui

### ABSTRACT

Yiwu has transformed from one of the poorest rural counties in the 1970s to one of the richest modern cities in China during the 2010s. This paper examines this significant historical transformation and its key contributing factors along the five dimensions: marketization, industrialization, urbanization, internationalization and digitalization. It also identifies what historical and contemporary factors stimulated the rapid growth of Yiwu and how Yiwu is a special case in comparison to other Chinese localities. This paper argues that business entrepreneurship, local government and their interaction have played particular roles in promoting Yiwu's transformation. This study builds on and contributes to literature across the fields of development, entrepreneurship and anthropology. It demonstrates how entrepreneurship can promote development even if a region is lacking in what are often assumed to be necessary resources for development. However, for this to be the case there is the need for a supportive and risk-taking government.

### KEYWORDS

Trade; entrepreneurship;  
government; development;  
China

## Introduction

Yiwu is an exceptional case. Its transformation from one of the poorest rural counties in Zhejiang Province of China in the 1970s to one of the richest cities today is widely described as a miracle (for example, Wang 2009; Chen 2011; Lu, Yang, and Zheng 2014; State Council 2014). According to Zhejiang Statistical Yearbook at various years published by Zhejiang Statistics Bureau, in 1978 when China began its reform to embrace the market economic system, the per capita GDP of China and Zhejiang Province were 381 and 331 yuan respectively, both higher than the 235 yuan of Yiwu. In 2008, when the reform had been implemented for two decades, the per capita GDP of Yiwu reached 68,508 yuan, 3 times that of the whole country and 1.6 times that of Zhejiang Province. In 2016, Yiwu's GDP rose to 112 billion yuan, making it the 14th richest among 2100 counties in China. Yiwu's per capita GDP was 88,823 yuan, much higher than the national average of 53,817 yuan. During this transformation, more than 80 per cent of the population were turned from farmers to traders and from rural to urban-based. A historically agricultural county is now best known for its large wholesale market of small commodities, or any small items, materials, products, articles and objects that are relatively inexpensive, non-technical, mass-market (Bryant 2016). Yiwu produces, sells and exports its goods to more than 200 countries.

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This paper examines this significant historical transformation and its key contributing factors along the five dimensions of Yiwu's marketization, industrialization, urbanization, internationalization and digitalization. It builds on and seeks to contribute towards several bodies of literature that cross the boundaries of development, entrepreneurship and anthropology. Development studies argue that fostering industrial clusters enhances regional and national development. A cluster refers to groups of closely-related industries co-located in a region (Porter 1990). The importance of clusters has long been recognized through Alfred Marshall's analysis on the rapid and sustained growth of British industry in the nineteenth century (Marshall [1890] 1920). Some characteristics or embeddedness are deemed necessary for a cluster to form and grow, for example, a high-quality research university, skilled labour pool, funding, favourable policies; favourable city characteristics and historical luck (Braunerhjelm and Feldman 2006). However, this body of study lacks the explanation as to how a cluster can be developed without any significant local embeddedness.

Entrepreneurship literature could offer answers since entrepreneurship has long been recognized as an important factor to promote development. This is due to entrepreneurs' ability to foster innovation, enhance employment creation and ensure more equitable income distribution (Hirschman 1958; Acs 2006). An entrepreneur is willing and able to convert a new idea or invention into a successful innovation. Entrepreneurship employs 'the gale of creative destruction' to replace, in whole or in part, inferior offerings across markets and industries, simultaneously creating new products and new business models. However, entrepreneurship can be promoted or depressed by the institutional environment, of which policy is a critical element (North 1990). Existing literature lacks clear recognition of how entrepreneurs and policy makers work hand in hand to promote a region's development.

My approach to the study of Yiwu has also been informed by work in anthropology. In particular I have been influenced by work that has emphasized how in order for researchers to understand the forms of economic globalization, which are central for the dynamics of cities such as Yiwu, it is necessary to trace traders and commodities across space; as well as to give analytical space to considerations of the meaning that traders attach to their activities in the particular contexts in which they work (for example, Matthews, Ribeiro, and Vega 2012). Hence, the material on which this article is based arises out of extensive fieldwork in China, UAE, USA and UK. Building on anthropological studies that have deployed life history as a medium into understanding the dynamics of being a trader (for example, Marsden 2015, 2016), I gathered the life histories of over 100 Yiwu entrepreneurs, policy makers and foreign traders. These life histories have also been used to juxtapose individual trajectories of traders with the stages of the Yiwu's development as a key international trading centre. Finally, I have also used media information and proceedings from meetings of the Yiwu municipal, Zhejiang provincial and Chinese central governments.

The resulting findings indicate strongly that Yiwu's development is reflected in its marketization, industrialization, urbanization, internationalization and digitalization. Marketization records Yiwu's transition from a small, rural free market to China's, and eventually the world's, largest small commodity trading hub. Industrialization refers to the shift that Yiwu has undergone, from being purely a trading centre to one in which goods are also produced. Urbanization refers to the dramatic change of Yiwu from a

rural county to a modern city. Internationalization indicates the extent to which traders in Yiwu have increasingly turned their attention away from domestic trading, towards international markets and forms of investment. Finally, digitalization demonstrates the ways in which Yiwu has refocused from physical shop floor trading to a mixed economy of both the physical shop and online trading. The following sections demonstrate how the interaction between entrepreneurs and policy makers promoted Yiwu's development in these five dimensions respectively.

## Marketization

Yiwu's market as a whole consists of Yiwu International Business & Trade Mansion (*Yiwu guoji shangmao cheng*), also called the Futian Market, and a dozen specialized wholesale markets, including the Huangyuan Market for clothing, furniture and others. This is the outcome of Yiwu's marketization across five stages.

### *1st stage (1950s–1970s): 'walking traders' and spontaneous trading market laid the foundation for the future Yiwu market*

I first came across Yiwu as a child, in my hometown in Jiangsu province, the neighbour of Zhejiang Province where Yiwu locates. That was in the middle of the 1970s when everything was in short supply in China. When the person who shouldered the burden of commodity (*huo lang dan*) came to our village, my mother would buy a candy for me by exchanging chicken feathers. As a child I was unaware that this barter was illegal and that those involved were discriminated against by the wider society.

After formally researching Yiwu in recent years, I learnt that those traders were from Yiwu. They were called walking traders (*xing shang*) and their activity was called 'exchanging candy with chicken feathers' (*ji mao huan tang*). Astonishingly, I discovered that Yiwu's 'exchanging candy with chicken feathers' dated back to the sixteenth century (Chen 2011) and through this activity, local people made additional income to supplement limited gain from agriculture. However, from the 1950s until the 1970s, China held a planned economic growth model. The government carried out a thorough clean-up of private capital around 1952, and from then until 1978 all enterprises in China were state or collectively owned. The country suffered from a severe shortage of commodities (Wu 2008), and Yiwu suffered more given the nature owning of hilly land. But local farmers were not allowed to trade as the 'three No rule' (*san bu gui ding*) was strictly applied by the central government, which is 'No farmers were allowed to give up agriculture and do business, no industrial products were allowed to trade in free market, and no self-employed person is allowed to engage in wholesale business' (Wang 2009, 15).

However, this would not stop Yiwu people from trading. One early walking trader, who began to trade in early 1970s when he was just above 20s, recalled:

Despite the illegal status of trading, I still took great risks and found excuses to leave hometown for trading, because otherwise I would not have money to buy food and clothes for the family. I often claimed that I needed to travel far for our community's business so must obtain certificate from local government authority. ... Without a valid certificate we would not be able to trade, nor buy train tickets or find an accommodation, and instead could be arrested at any time (Chen Hongcai, quoted in Liu and Yao 2014).

Local governments were not allowed to publicly support farmers' trading, but took risks to issued certificates. Archival data presented in the museum inside Yiwu's Futian Market shows that the original certificates issued by township and municipal governments were dated back to early 1970s, long before the nation's economic reform starting in 1978. 'This was unique as governments in neighbouring counties or the entire China did not approve trading. .... And the reason was the people were too poor so must trade' (CCTV 2009).

Many local traders believed their early experience as a *xing shang* laid a solid foundation for them to conduct large-scale trading business afterwards. Ms Zhou Xiaoguang is in her 50s and has actively been involved in trade since turning 16 years old, firstly as a walking trader between 1979 and 1985. She brought small goods such as embroidery needles from Yiwu to sell to a dozen of provinces including the far North-Eastern Heilongjiang province. She is now the chair of Xinguang Group, one of the top accessory companies in China and an agent of Swarovski. She still held the fresh memory on her early trading experience:

Life was very harsh at that time. Information was unavailable and communication tool was almost none except for telegraph and limited public telephone. We had to explore every potential market by travelling to the place. Train tickets were so difficult to get. Once getting on a train, we often slept under the seats of other passengers. ... Once arriving at a place, we sought a popular location as a temporary market to sell goods, and were frequently driven away by local officers. If the local demand was low, we moved to another place. In this way, we accumulated the most valuable market experience which benefits us for life (interview, 4 August 2017).

Her husband Mr. Yu Yunxin, also in his 50s, was another walking trader at that time. He introduced: 'When discovering a promising market [as a walking trader], I communicated with her [Ms Zhou] and other traders to exchange market information so as to make more money from a more promising market' (interview, 4 August 2017). The two got married after both had made huge contributions to improving their family living standard.

At the end of 1978, Yiwu traders attempted to break through the policy restrictions on trade. They formed many temporary markets in Yiwu by simply placing their trading baskets together on the roads of villages and towns. This was the earliest market form of Yiwu.

## **2nd stage (1981–85): officially approve trading**

In April 1981, the spontaneous market was moved to Bei Men Street, after 200 temporary licenses were issued to individual traders by the Yiwu County Industry and Commerce Bureau, allowing a limited degree of private economy. This was a risk-taking action because no clear permission was given by the central government (Wang 2009). This was also a significant action as Yiwu traders were allowed to trade although it did not publicly announce its permission. Farmers holding the certificate were allowed to buy small commodities from state-owned enterprises or stores, and then sell them at the market.

In April 1982, Mr. Xie Gaohua became the General Secretary of CCP of Yiwu County (*xian wei shu ji*). He recalled:

I am not a native resident of Yiwu. When being appointed to the *shuji* of Yiwu County, my mother was upset, asking why I was allocated to such a poor county, but I felt strongly

about how to eradicate the poverty of Yiwu as the prime responsible person for this county. (Liu and Yao 2014)

At that time, national government policy on private trade had not been relaxed, and although Yiwu's government permitted farmers to trade, tax officers still regarded many goods sold at the market as not allowed or requiring more tax paid on them. One female trader Feng Aiqian was frequently driven away by tax officers. She was angry, so she came to the County Government building to seek justice. Xie recalled how this female trader reinforced his determination to allow local people to trade:

I asked her to calm down and explain why she should be supported. Ms. Feng stated that she had no job but four kids; she conducted small trading to supplement her family living and her behaviour did not harm anyone. I was impressed and had a deep thought. As central government did not switch the green light to trading by farmers, I went to rural areas to investigate the truth. I witnessed the hardship of local people and realized that trading was indeed a major income supplement to farmers. On my return I abruptly promoted the idea that 'small commodity trading is Yiwu's major advantage' and supported market development. I claimed that I will take full responsibility if provincial and central governments criticize this decision. I was determined to open the small commodity market even though I would lose my official hat (*wu sha mao*) because of this. But other members in Yiwu Municipal Government said they would support the decision too so all of us took the responsibility for deciding to support the market. (Liu and Yao 2014, 111)

But critics highlighted the negative impact of farmers' trade, such as tax evasion and disrupting public order. Xie realized that he must regulate the market first, in order to support it (Liu and Yao 2014). On 25 August 1982, the government of Chou Cheng Town, where trading was taking place, issued 'Strengthening the Management of Small Commodity Market'. This was officially the No.1 file on supporting but also regulating the trading, announcing the opening of a small commodity market in Hu Qing Men on 5 September 1982. Local people needed to register and obtain a certificate issued by the local government in order to trade inside the market. By the end of 1982, Yiwu had a total of 833 registered traders, including 800 farmers, 33 jobless and youth.

Following this No. 1 file, Xie Gaohua announced the revolutionary 'four allows' (*si ge yun xu*) on 26 November 1982, which was further formalized on 4 December 1982 as No. 172 file of Yiwu County Government. 'Four allows' were: allow farmers to trade, allow long-distance trafficking, allow urban and rural markets' operation, and allow multi-channel competition. Once again, these ideas were 'ahead of the central government policy' (Liu and Yao 2014).

In 1983, the earliest tax policy was issued for Yiwu's trading. Before this point, tax officers charged tax in a very casual way, for example, charging one yuan per person per day for those who sold at the market. With the issued tax policy, traders had to register for trading and pay tax based on their revenue. This was a simplified tax policy in order to avoid complex process such as paying different taxes for different categories of goods. In addition, Yiwu's tax was perceived as 'reasonable – not too high or too low' (CEO of Yiwu Toy Ltd, interview, 7 August 2017). Hence, the wholesale market was promoted based on such simple and 'friendly' tax policies.

On 5 October 1984, Xie Gaohua announced the government strategy of 'Promoting commerce to develop the county' (*xing shang jian xian*). This placed commerce at the centre of the local government policymaking. Yiwu market was rapidly developed with

the focus of domestic customers. Traders in the market were called ‘sitting trader’ (*zuo shang*), compared with the earlier ‘walking trader’ (*xing shang*).

Ms Zhou transformed into a ‘sitting trader’ at Yiwu market in 1985 after giving birth to her son, while her husband continued his walking trader journey. Although not a native of Yiwu, she was allocated a booth in Yiwu market, for which she was grateful, stating that ‘Yiwu people do not decimate non Yiwu traders’. She successfully transferred from a walking to a sitting trader (*cong xing shang biancheng zuo shang*) due to her better understanding of customers from different regions of China. She claimed, ‘*xing shang* were among the earliest entrepreneurs of China who explored potential customer demands and understood how to source supply from one region to meet the demand of another. China’s market was created by our feet’ (interview, 4 August 2017).

### **3rd stage (1986–1992): question Yiwu model and its resolution**

In 1986 the Chinese had a nationwide discussion about the merits of socialism and capitalism. Many asked if the Yiwu model was attached to capitalism or socialism by picking out problems existing in Yiwu, such as fake goods and low quality. Yiwu’s success was questioned. The debate triggered a shock in Yiwu, with business people very concerned about their fate. Some considered stopping trade as they had already accumulated a good fortune. Many rushed into banks to withdraw their deposit, but banks were closed, and the market was at risk. Some subsequently left to search for opportunities in other cities, causing a period of anxiety and confusion. Trading volume was reduced due to the doubt and uncertainty (CCTV 2009; Wang 2009, 20).

Yiwu Municipal Government foresaw the danger that the market would collapse overnight, despite the years of painstaking promotion. It made its position of supporting the market and private economy clear, arguing that private economy was an important part of a socialist economy and must be encouraged and guided unwaveringly. This standpoint was announced to business people through media, publicity and officers’ personal contacts. By the end of 1990, business people’s confidence seemed to be restored as the demand for booths was increased to 10,500 (Wang 2009, 20).

The questioning was ended eventually in 1992 when Deng Xiaoping made the Southern Tour to announce that Chinese reform would continue. Yiwu returned to normal. It was in the same year of 1992 that the National Industry and Commerce Bureau renamed ‘Yiwu Small Commodity Market’ to be ‘Zhejiang China Small Commodity City’. Yiwu itself also made various efforts to restore its reputation, for example, they invited the most well-known host of China Central Television (CCTV) to visit and report Yiwu positively (CCTV 2009).

### **4th stage (1992–2014): rapid development and institutionalization**

Yiwu learnt lessons from the debate and decided to improve market operation so as to avoid unnecessary further debate. In 1992, Yiwu Municipal Government implemented a massive reform which categorized commodity location in Futian Market. Prior to this, buyers had to search the goods they required throughout the market mixed by 16 categories of goods. The Industry and Commerce Bureau of Yiwu Municipal Government built a new market structure consisting of five districts (*qu*), hosting same category of



goods at same district. It then encouraged traders to trade a single category of product (rather than trading several in the past). After the policy implementation, Futian Market held a total of 70,000 booths, selling 1,700,000 different types of small commodities in five districts. Major categories of goods included arts and crafts, textile accessories, ornaments, hardware, stationery, toys, electric appliance, garments and so on. Huangyuan Market hosts another 5700 booths selling jeans, sportswear, and other types of garments. There were about 10 professional markets and 30 professional streets with shops that specialize in trading particular commodities.

This reform significantly saved customers' time while also improving management quality of the market. According to an Iranian trader who has been trading and acting as an agent for Yiwu goods for more than 15 years, 'In this way, traders did not need to walk around the entire market but just one or two concentrated districts. More importantly, the price was transparent and traders could reduce the possibility of being cheated on price and quality' (interview, 31 July 2017). This reform was initially resisted strongly by shopkeepers because merchants had to be specialized in one or two categories and they were also difficult to ask for a higher price when placing their goods next to other shopkeepers. But they soon shared the benefits of the reform as the transparency and convenience brought by the reform attracted more customers (CEO of Yiwu Toy Ltd, interview, 7 August 2017).

Before 1993, the local government guided the market development through forming a management committee made up of a group of small producers, buyers, government officials and administrators. In 1993, Yiwu Municipal Government established Zhejiang China Small Commodities Market Group ('Shangcheng Group' in short) which, on behalf of the government, owns and manages the Futian, Huangyuan, and Production Material Markets, with a total operation size of 5.5 million square metres (CCP General Secretary of Shangcheng Group, interview, 23 September 2017). It holds the responsibility to protect and increase the value of state assets, that is, the Market. It soon became a listed shareholding company, with 54 per cent owned by the state and 46 per cent by the public. The Chairman of the Shangcheng Group (interview, 16 December 2016) introduced how the Yiwu government empowered its governance and market functions:

After ten years' development, Yiwu government felt more urgent to understand regular pattern of Yiwu's development. It realized the necessity to establish an entity to follow the objective law of market economy and to promote market's prosper. It expected our Group to promote the cluster and build our brand and promote information and communication.

According to the market operation size, categories of displayed and sold goods, and numbers of booths, Yiwu Market can be considered the world's largest small commodity wholesale centre. It reached the peak of its development by 2014 (State Council 2014).

### *5th stage (2014-present): seek new growth model*

All the shopkeepers in Futian market pointed out that Yiwu's trading business has declined since 2014. The CCP General Secretary of Shangcheng Group introduced the situation:

It is true that our trading business is affected by the recessionary global economy. Our market kept the 20 per cent annual increase rate on its trading business between 2008 and 2014. It

was much higher before 2008. At present [in 2016] the annual increase rate is 10 per cent. (interview, 22 May 2016)

Analysing what causes the market to decline, the Chair of Shangcheng Group elaborated to me during an interview that:

2014 was the turning point of China's economy from rapid to slow growth. While domestic demand was demolished, global economy is entirely under recession. Salary of domestic workers rises considerably. Industrial transformation is inevitable. The phenomenon of China being the world factory will not appear again. This demands our operators [in the Market] to carry out technology upgrading. Those unable to do so have to transfer capacity.

The local government continued its lobby to provincial and central governments to strengthen Yiwu's position. On the 4 March 2011, Yiwu was formally nominated by the State Development Reform Commission (SDRC) as 'the international trade comprehensive pilot city' but Yiwu did not benefit from this position until the end of 2013 when it was granted a special tax claim code by China's Custom Authority (*haiguan zongshu*) for its traded goods. Since 2014, exporters with a large quantity and volume, but a total value of less than 300,000 Yuan RMB have been entitled to claim from this code. With this special code the goods enjoy a speedy and simplified procedure when claiming exported goods at custom and inspection bureau. This new system has not only sped up custom claiming, but more importantly regulated the trading goods and enhanced quality control of the goods (Zhejiang Provincial Department of Commerce, interview, 6 April 2017). Over the years, 'the Yiwu trading system was established in a bottom-up, spontaneous manner. The tax system was not regulated' (Director of Division of Promotion, Department of Foreign Trade, Ministry of Commerce, interview, 31 March 2017). Traders encountered problems and ineffectiveness when claiming tax. This was due to the difficulty of categorizing small commodities precisely, as they needed to claim different categories of goods at different prices, place them in different containers and so on. With the new policy, traders only need to claim one code which is unified for Yiwu small commodity. In addition to speeding up and simplifying the tax payment system, the new tax code also allowed customers to trace original producers in case there was an issue on the goods they sold. It achieved its goals as 'risk can be controlled, original producer can be found, and the responsibility can be investigated' (Deputy director, Dept. of Institutional Reform, State Development Reform Commission, interview, 29 March 2017).

The deputy director of Yiwu Land and Port Administration introduced the outcome of Yiwu government's efforts to improve Yiwu's logistic services during this period of time:

The good results included to allow Yiwu-exported goods to be process export claim at Yiwu Port. Exporters and agents got their goods inspected at Yiwu while filling another form to transfer their claims from Yiwu Port to Ningbo Port. While Ningbo Port still occasionally inspects goods from Yiwu Port, the overall efficiency has improved considerably. With more efforts, now Yiwu Port and Ningbo Port are both subsidiaries of Zhen Jiang Provincial Seaport Group. We are hoping that this will pave the way for Yiwu goods to be exported at Yiwu Port. The goods with completed procedures will be transported to Ningbo Port. The under construction Yi Yong Zhou (Yiwu -Ningbo – Zhoushan) Pathway and especially its Ningbo to Jinghua Railway, expected to be completed by 2020, will vastly increase the transportation capacity (interview, 31 July 2017).

Yiwu government also intended to diversify Yiwu business from export, to both export and import. It thus grasped the timely opportunity to connect its business to the nation's major 'One Belt and One Road' (*yi dai yi lu*) strategy (Nolan 2015). With the strategy, China launched 9 railway routes between November 2014 and 2017, connecting Yiwu and others to cities alongside the New Silk Road including Madrid, Tehran, Chelybinsk, Mazare Sharif, Riga, Minsk, London and Prague. It eventually made possible the operation of Yiwu-Xinjiang-Madrid railway line. Yiwu Land and Port Administration and the cargo operator – Tian Meng Company – both revealed why these routes were still not operated frequently. They major reason they claimed was that 'Cargo operators lack interests on these rail routes for the concern of making loss as traders have not got use of these routes' (interview, 12 April 2017).

Many of my correspondents believe Yiwu will largely benefit from the central government initiative of 'One Belt and One Road'. Some noted that their trading activities have been performing better since 2017 thanks to improved trade with One Belt and One Road countries. This claim was supported by Yiwu Custom statistics. Taking the example of the first quarter of 2017, Yiwu's total import and export was 49 billion yuan, an increase of 24 per cent of which export was 48 billion yuan. Among this 48 billion yuan of export, 25 billion yuan was exported to the countries along the 'Belt and Road' route, up 19 per cent over the same period of the previous year and accounting for 51 per cent of the total exports of Yiwu. Among the top 10 exporting destination countries, 8 were 'One Belt and One Road' countries. As Yiwu Research Institute analyzed why the high export to the One Belt and One Road countries can be realized (Yang and Lu 2015):

Along the One Belt and One Road, especially Central Asia and Central and Eastern European countries, the demand for daily consumer goods is extremely great but their own production and supply capacity is weak. Yiwu's small commodity production and markets are well-developed. Hence, Yiwu has a good complementarity with these regions.

## Industrialization

The foundation of industrialization in Yiwu (by large the Zhejiang province) was weak. By 1980 there were 502 township-owned enterprises, which rose to 7618, plus 1658 village and individual-owned enterprises by 1993 (Chen 2011, 126). There were no large back-bone state-owned firms in Yiwu. In 1992–93 Yiwu market had almost 10,000 merchants. Traders desired industrial development in Yiwu to increase supplied goods and reduce supply time, giving them advantages in intense competition. Local production can also facilitate traders to control the quality of goods and find ways of innovation (Liu and Yao 2014).

On the other hand, according to a former Yiwu government officer, it was a popular perception in Yiwu that 'manufacturing enables less profit than distribution business [or trading business]' (interview, 31 March 2017). To improve the local traders' understanding of the importance of developing industries, the Municipal Government held an exhibition entitled 'Famous, Superb and New' on the 28 September 1994. It stipulated that the exhibited goods must be 'famous, superb or new' so that it attracted the best producers from all over China. Precisely as planned, 'Yiwu traders were very clever. They soon negotiated with the exhibited producers and became their agents. However, they did not wish to be

controlled. Some entrepreneurs therefore had their ideas to operate factories' (CCTV 2009). Yiwu is now the venue for several nationwide and internal exhibitions. Yiwu's top producer and trader of water tap in Futian Market, stated,

I was educated to middle school only and without any knowledge on water tap design. However, I went to all the exhibitions to observe and learn. Now I 'design' water taps in my mind before instructing my young designers in the factories. They turned my ideas into designing papers. My factories would then produce. (interview, 15 December 2016)

Female entrepreneur, Zhou Xiaoguang opened a hair accessory factory, and then she found that her talented employees later left Xinguang and opened their own hair accessory factories and shops. Tao Haidi opened a zipper factory. The zipper produced over the course of three days is equivalent to several laps around the earth.

While more and more entrepreneurs began to produce goods for the Market, Yiwu turned itself from 'buy China and sell China' (*mai zhong guo mai zhong guo*) to 'small commodities, made in Yiwu' (*xiao shang ping, yi wu zao*). More capital flew from commerce to industry. In 1998, Yiwu government announced a new policy of 'mutual reinforcement of industry and trade' (*gong mao lian dong*) (Liu and Yao 2014, 553). It initiated ownership reform by enabling firms to implement shareholding enterprise systems. It also subsidized those who intended to open factories through issuing policies on tax, land and loan. According to Mr Zhang, Deputy Director of National Land and Resources Bureau of Yiwu, local government made abundant industrial land available at preferential rates starting in the 1990s, offering local traders a direct incentive to move into the industrial zone (interview, 14 March 2017). This was further confirmed by Ms Zhou of Xinguang Group who recalled:

We initially wanted to build our factory and invest in Zhuji [county], as that is our home county. But Zhuji government was not interested in a small firm like ours. Hearing that there was a piece of land in Yiwu, I called Yiwu government to try our luck. Unexpectedly, they warmly welcomed us and cleared up all the obstacles for building factory in a very short period of time. (interview, 4 August 2017)

Yiwu government also offered more favourable policies to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) to Yiwu to promote industry. By 2014, the government had set up 2 economic zones at provincial level, 12 industrial bases at national level, 26,700 industrial enterprises, 131 high tech firms including 6 national key enterprise, and 135 R&D centres (Ma et al. 2014, 263). These were key supportive mechanisms for Yiwu in the development of its industry.

As a result, many competitive industries including textile, clothing, craft and printing emerged, leading to the rapid growth of Yiwu's industrial economy. Seamless underclothes accounted for 20 per cent of the global market share (80 per cent of national share). According to the Director of Department of Marketing, Shangcheng Group, by the end of 2016, Yiwu had over 1 million suppliers from the entire nation, of which only one third were from Yiwu (interview, 15 December 2016).

## Urbanization

Yiwu's urbanization was driven by the development of marketization and industrialization. According to the Deputy Director of Yiwu Municipal Development and Reform Commission, the key issue of urbanization is how to use land:

Land is the mother of wealth. All the development of Yiwu is related to land. Without land, market cannot be expanded and factory cannot be constructed. Foreign investment would also be restricted if no land is allocated to the invested projects. (interview, 15 April 2017)

Therefore, he explained further, 'when using land, three red lines were not allowed to cross: urban and rural expansion, permanent agriculture land, and ecosystem'. In brief, Yiwu's urbanization experienced the following stages.

During the first stage between 1978 and 1988, urbanization level, that is, the percentage of permanent urban residents out of the total population increased from 8 to 12 per cent. The construction and development of Yiwu Market helped the formation of the commercial centre of Yiwu. Transportation, catering and other tertiary industries and traditional light industries began to develop. The suburb towns surrounding Yiwu with convenient transportation benefited firstly from the spill over effect of the urban economy, and their handicraft industry was soon developed (Director, Yiwu Research Institute of Reform, interview, 11 April 2017). In 1988, Yiwu became a city.

During this period, there were many profit-making or bribery opportunities during the land allocations, householder relocations and market constructions. As the former head of Chou Cheng town (interview, 16 December 2016) recalled his own experience:

we had many occasions to allocate newly constructed houses to those who were relocated due to market construction and others who wished to live in the houses which were modern compared to old fashioned traditional residential houses in Yiwu. Those houses were in high demand. All the officials in the five political streams including the CCP, the National People's Congress and the Political Consultative Conference all wanted a house from me. In the end I had to let everyone draw lots and invite notary office to witness the process.

During the second stage between 1988 and 1998, the urbanization level rose from 12 to 41 per cent. On 19 May 1990, the State Council issued the 'The Provisional Regulations of People's Republic of China on renting and transferring the use right of state-owned land'. Yiwu became a pilot city to experiment with these regulations. Local entrepreneur Gong Pinzhong intended to expand his business by establishing his own factories. He purchased 10 acres at 1.26 million yuan in 1994, then 30 acres and 300 acres so that his company became the leader in the industry. The basic reason that he purchased this large amount of land was that the local government encouraged merchants to transform from trading to producing and trading; hence the price of the land was very low (CCTV 2009).

During the third stage between 1998 and 2014, the urbanization rate of Yiwu rose to 71 per cent (as of 2010). By the end of 2014, the urban area of Yiwu comprised 1105 square kilometres, under the jurisdiction of 6 towns and 8 streets. The registered local population (native Yiwu) was 770,000, with a migrated population of 1.3 million, mainly from Jiangxi, Henan and Anhui which had 252,000, 167,000 and 150,000 respectively, together with 126,000 from the rest of Zhejiang. Urbanization took industrial development as the foundation, which 'promotes employment agglomeration, followed by the move of rural population to the premise of urban agglomeration' (Deputy head of Marketing Department, Shangcheng Group, interview, 13 December 2016).

During the fourth stage between 2015 and 2018, the urbanization rate of Yiwu rose to 76 per cent (as of 2016), compared with 58 per cent of the national urbanization rate. In 2016, the State Development and Reform Commission (SDRC) issued a comprehensive

national new urbanization pilot programme. Yiwu was among the first batch of 62 pilot cities. In light of this, Yiwu is aiming for completing urbanization. The current 281 villages will be gathered to 55 new communities with high-floor, multi-village gathering community construction. 600,000 people will be accommodated. According to the deputy head of the Department of National Land and Resources of Yiwu Municipal Government,

This reform will solve out three issues related to Yiwu's sustainable development, namely where the land comes from, where the money comes from and where the talents come from. After this reform, land will be available as rural people are moved to concentrated urban areas. The newly available land can be developed for multiple purposes, which will sort out the issue of money. Finally, the reform will turn rural and migrant population to urban residents of Yiwu. This will attract talented migrates. (interview, 15 April 2017)

## Internationalization

By 1997 less than 20 per cent of Yiwu's goods were exported, 'because the domestic market was so good and no one considered overseas market' (An operator in Futian Market, interview, 12 December 2016). In 2015, 65 per cent of Yiwu goods were exported. Despite Yiwu merchants' heavy focus on domestic market in the 1980s and 1990s, very few entrepreneurs began to internationalize before 1990s. Tong Changmao was one of the pioneers who embarked on a thrilling adventure to Dubai in 1995 when he was 27. He described his adventure as 'full of the ups and downs' (interview, 09 August 2017).

I followed a middleman to the UAE; assuming that I was in Dubai but later spotted that I was actually in Sharjah. The middleman already disappeared. Without any language skill, I managed to come to Dubai through body language. I began to investigate the market. I discovered that almost everything in this market was much expensive than those in Yiwu, thinking that all of them could be replaced by Yiwu goods. I imported a container of shirts to Dubai, only finding that none of the shirts could be sold, as the Arabic man size was much bigger than that of the Chinese. I lost everything. ... I eventually made a breakthrough after an Indian trader made a small order from me. I transported the ordered goods from Yiwu to Dubai, which were sold so well that more orders followed. For the first time I withdrew US \$150,000 from bank, bought me a first class ticket and back to Yiwu with a bag full of cash. I became the household name in Yiwu. Many Yiwu people followed me to Dubai. ... I was late called as 'copy boy' by the local traders in Dubai as I basically replaced most of the goods in Dubai market by using similar or imitated goods from Yiwu. Long existing local traders were driven away from the market.

Shi Zhongmou, another Yiwu entrepreneur, was arrested in Xinjiang for selling electric watches, which were mainly smuggled from Hong Kong in early 1980s. After being released from prison, he continued trading while also initiating an idea to construct a Yiwu market in Xinjiang to sell Yiwu goods locally, while also targeting Russian markets, as well as those connected to Muslim-majority Central Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan. He recalled: 'I eventually completed the construction of Xinjiang Business Trade City in 1993. I subsequently constructed more than 10 markets inside and outside China' (CCTV 2009). Xinjiang Yiwu market played a significant role in attracting Muslim traders to China and promoting Yiwu goods in the Islamic world (An operator in Futian Market, interview, 13 December 2016; Marsden 2017).

The internationalization was accelerated after 1997 when China turned from a shortage to a surplus economy.

The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis enhanced Yiwu goods' advantage due to its low cost feature, because overseas customers favoured cheaper goods more. By the end of 1990s, the central government removed the restriction on import and export. This was reinforced after 2001 when China joined WTO. (An officer of the Ministry of Commerce, interview, 5 August 2016)

Internationalization transformed Yiwu from being domestic to international market orientated.

However, according to the director of Marketing Department of Shangcheng group who was making an effort to establish an overseas Yiwu market in East Europe and Central Asian countries, Yiwu's internationalization was 'very limited' despite about 60 per cent of its goods being exported. He explained, 'The green [direct] investment is limited, mainly in the fashion of constructing a trading mall or Yiwu-like markets' (interview, 15 December 2016).

## Digitalization

Since 2000, with the effect of national electric (E) commerce booming in China, E commerce was also rapidly developed in Yiwu, which made considerable impact on Yiwu's traditional wholesale market. The deputy general party secretary of Shangcheng Group admitted:

A few years ago we had a large debate about whether we should have E commerce. We did not significantly promote E business until now. Physical trading was our advantage and our merchants were good at that. Hence we did not cooperate with Ma Yun by then. (interview, 22 May 2016)

Inevitably, however, Yiwu's market was extended into two sections – a physical one and an online one. To ensure Yiwu's position in online business, the Municipal Government held the World Digital Business Conference annually in Yiwu. It also held exhibitions every year for products of small and medium E business companies. Ms Chen revealed that these events were expected to improve performance and ensure leading position of Yiwu's E business. There were also some measurements to support those with limited finance and education to operate their E business, for example, offering training courses (interview, 22 May 2016).

On 21 December 2012, Yiwu Gou, Yiwu's online sale platform, was established, 13 years after Ma Yun set up his online platform Alibaba in 1999. Even as a latecomer, Yiwu's online business rose rapidly. The Deputy Party Sectary of Shangcheng Group introduced:

In 2015 our physical trading revenue was over US\$100 billion, while online trading revenue was also over US\$ 100 billion. 40 per cent of our merchants are trading both online and offline. Of course, we need to integrate online and offline trading. Alibaba and Jing Dong are both looking for us to form partnership as they have online but not offline. We are confident, as we are the largest offline trading body. Online business has huge issues in terms of lack of supervision on selling defective goods and poor management on online stores. Still, we need to 'dance with the wolfs.' (interview, 22 May 2016)

Despite this achievement, most locals believed that Yiwu Municipal Government made a mistake in promoting E commerce. A former deputy mayor of Yiwu observed:

Local government was not prepared for danger in times of peace and lacked vision. That they did not accept Ma Yun's proposal to form a partnership was the evidence. In this way Yiwu lost the best timing to establish an online platform. (interview, 7 August 2016)



He continued: 'Without being strong on "two legs", that is, both physical and online trading, Yiwu faced greater pressure when global trading was in recession' (interview, 15 April 2017).

## Discussion and conclusion

Yiwu's market and its related businesses have fostered a rapidly growing cluster consisting of traders, producers, suppliers, agents and other service firms who facilitated trading and transporting. Yiwu's significant transformation is summarized in the introduction and elaborated in the above sections. Below I present what are claimed by my respondents to be that 'Yiwu factors' that have contributed to the cluster and these transformation.

As the Chair of Shangcheng Group put it, correct self-positioning is the key for Yiwu's transformation and achievement. Since China began the reform in 1978, three major rural industrialization and regional development models have emerged: 'Wenzhou model', 'Pearl River model' and 'Sunan [South East China] model'. Yiwu did not pursue the 'Sunan model' that started with collective industry, nor the 'Pearl River model' that was promoted by FDI and its related export-oriented economy. However, Yiwu did benefit from the 'Wenzhou model' in many ways given their geographical proximity. Both Yiwu and Wenzhou were founded on 'specialized markets plus rural industrialization'. However, while Yiwu copied the Wenzhou model in the early stage by emphasizing the market, it departed from the Wenzhou model as it continued to focus on the market while Wenzhou transformed its focus from light industry to heavy industry. This may be related to the fact that Wenzhou began with family production and then promoted its market to sell family made products. In other words, the market is not the key strength and hence the focus of Wenzhou model. However, Yiwu began with trading goods from the entirety of China. Although local traders extended their activities from purely trading to producing, supplying and internalizing, creating cluster and promoting development, trading was, and still is Yiwu's strength. While it is not yet clear which model is better, the fact is that Yiwu continues to grow steadily whereas Wenzhou's growth has declined considerably. What is worth noting is that Yiwu lacked all the key resources deemed necessary for a cluster's forming and growing, including high education, and a talent pool.

Entrepreneurship has been found as being critical in Yiwu's transformation. Local informants do not use the term entrepreneurship but instead 'Yiwu spirit' to explain why Yiwu succeeded. 'Yiwu spirit' is described with 12 Chinese words: '*qin geng hao xue, gang zheng yong wei, cheng xin bao rong*', meaning 'diligent and studious, upright and brave, integrity and tolerance' (Chen 2011). Such entrepreneurship was nurtured by local culture respecting business and motivated by the desire to deal with poverty. Mr Zhu Xiaoliang, a native Yiwu and official in Ministry of Commerce, summarized: 'Everyone's common mentality [in Yiwu] is to be killed rather than starve to death. Those brave ones began to trade regardless of its legal status'. The Director of Division of Comprehensive Reform, Zhejiang Provincial Development and Reform Commission, further expanded on the meaning of Yiwu spirit: 'Yiwu people were not satisfied by the status quo – poverty – so they were determined to change the status. However, they were more wise than brave. They searched tirelessly and eventually discovered a development model suitable for Yiwu' (interview, 6 April 2017). Entrepreneurship is reflected not only in the motivation but also means of eradicating poverty. That requires innovation, including new ways of

doing business and products with new features and prices. My findings concur with the existing literature on Yiwu (for example, Si et al. 2015): Yiwu entrepreneurs are ceaseless in their attempts to test out new ways of doing things, from trading to producing and E commerce; as a result, their products and prices are changing continuously. Of course, rapid development in Wenzhou and other areas also benefited from local people's entrepreneurship, but Yiwu entrepreneurs are more realistic by concentrating on business they are most familiar with, that is, trading. They are probably also more globalized. For example, it is widely claimed that Wenzhou people favour the model of doing business with other Wenzhou natives in order to reduce transaction cost; by contrast, Yiwu entrepreneurs embrace the entire world to do business.

A supportive and capable local government is another widely claimed factor. As many business entrepreneurs expressed, they need a favourable institutional environment to shine and they have got it in Yiwu. As it was expressed by the researcher in Zhejiang Provincial Department of Commerce, Yiwu cluster would not have developed 'without local government's risk taking in permitting the chicken feather trading well before the national economic reform and challenging existing policies consistently after the reform' (interview, 6 April 2017). One recent media report showed relevant evidence. Early in 2017 when Mr. Xie Gaohua visited Yiwu, hundreds of local business people drove and parked on the road, waiting to welcome his visit. One said, 'Xie Shuji is our benefactor. We cannot forget about our benefactor'. At the same time, as claimed by research in Zhejiang Provincial Department of Commerce,

several generations of Zhejiang provincial government were all very reasonable and cautions in guiding the market and did not intervene market excessively. On the other hand, they actively helped local entrepreneurs who faced difficulties. ... This might be related to the fact that Zhejiang was not an industrial-strong province. The provincial government was very supportive to business, and this was why Zhejiang nurtured not only Yiwu but also Wenzhou and many other clusters. The support was even stronger after Minister Zhong Shan became the governor of our province. He directly removed barriers to international trade. He offered many concrete supports to Yiwu. (interview, 6 April 2017)

The well-balanced government role was considered extremely beneficial for Yiwu's development. A former visiting officer allocated by the Ministry of Commerce to Yiwu observed, 'Yiwu has not been controlled to death' (interview, 31 March 2017). The research in Zhejiang Provincial Department of Commerce extended this argument:

Yiwu's unique area is that the Market has never been privatized. It has always been in the hands of the local government. At the same time, the local government is wise. It did not excessively control neither lose control of the Market. Jinjiang in Fujian, Hanzhenjie in Wuhan and other specialized markets were largely privatized and controlled by one or a few individuals. Pursing maximum profit and minimum social responsibility was the consequence. Somehow Wenzhou also lacked a wise government as Yiwu didhas. In Yiwu, government controls the market through implementing policies to improve quality of goods and service of trading ... to ensure the best service and lower cost. (interview, 6 April 2017)

In summary, 'Yiwu spirit' or simply entrepreneurship drove local government to establish and promote the market while policy makers also actively took the advantage of local people's trading capability and entrepreneurship. Both business people and policy makers 'took risk to leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones' (Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence 2004, 657).

While Yiwu has made a significant transformation, local entrepreneurs and policy makers are fully aware of significant challenges. Yiwu benefited considerably from a large domestic market, with an insatiable demand for lower cost small commodities, especially in its early development stage. However, with rising living standards in China, such demand will inevitably reduce. Yiwu also benefited from the mass production capability in China which ensured the seemingly unlimited supply of affordable Yiwu goods. However, with the rising wage, material and environment protection costs, it is becoming more difficult to maintain the lower cost supply. Above all, the rapidly growing field of E-commerce has begun to source supply from producers rather than Yiwu wholesalers, posing challenges to traditional Yiwu traders who are slow in mastering E commerce methods.

I have sought in this article to explore Yiwu's historic development through the lenses of development, entrepreneurship and anthropology. Yiwu lacked many of the significant characteristics (for example, quality research universities, skilled labour pool, funding, favourable city characteristics and historical luck (Braunerhjelm and Feldman 2006) that are generally regarded by development specialists as enabling a cluster – or 'trading node' to form and grow. However, in less than three decades, Yiwu transformed from one of China's poorest to richest counties. Conventional work in development studies is unable to fully explain Yiwu's transformation, yet scholarly work on entrepreneurship offers important insights. The interview material presented in this article demonstrate that Yiwu's entrepreneurs were extremely capable in terms of fostering innovation, enhancing employment creation and ensuring more equitable income distribution (Hirschman 1958; Acs 2006). Such capacities help to explain how Yiwu developed so rapidly as a cluster without having access to significant local resources other than the entrepreneurial talents of local people. Entrepreneurship promotes the development of clusters and trading nodes, while also being supported by a government willing and able to take risks. Reaching such a conclusion, however, has been made possible through embracing the methods of social anthropology. I gathered the life histories of over 100 Yiwu entrepreneurs, policy makers and overseas Chinese and foreign traders, recognizing the critical insights these can offer into the dynamics of being a trader in the context of everyday life, and the distribution of commodities across space, and through these concerns and nature of low end forms of economic globalization more generally (for example, Matthews, Ribeiro, and Vega 2012; Marsden 2015, 2016). These are central concerns for the dynamics of Yiwu, as well as for the wider socio-economic context in which the city is located (for example, Wu 2008).

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## Hierarchies of trade in Yiwu and Dushanbe: The case of an Uzbek merchant family from Tajikistan

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## Hierarchies of trade in Yiwu and Dushanbe: The case of an Uzbek merchant family from Tajikistan

Diana Ibañez Tirado\*

### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the trading trajectory of an Uzbek family of merchants from Tajikistan. This family runs businesses in both Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe, and China's famous international trading city: Yiwu. The analysis is centred on the accounts placed by Tajikistan's Uzbek merchants about their historically sustained experience, often across several generations, in trading activities. These merchants' claims of belonging to a 'historical' trading community rather than being 'newcomers' to long-distance commerce are articulated in relation to notions of 'hierarchies of trade' as they evolve in a twofold relational model linking Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood and Dushanbe. I suggest that the forms of conviviality enacted in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood need to be understood in terms of the historical, multinational and transregional contacts that have occurred within the spaces of the former Soviet Union, as well as along the China-Russia and China-Central Asian borders. Equally, the hierarchies of trade of Uzbek merchants from Tajikistan in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood cut-across markers of identity that juxtapose the roles of Tajik and Uzbek communities in Tajikistan's contemporary politics and economics.

### KEYWORDS

Trade; hierarchies of trade; merchants; Yiwu; reputation; debt; Uzbek traders; Tajikistan

### Introduction: at the dinner table

On leaving the main entrance of the 1<sup>st</sup> District of Yiwu's Futian Market and crossing Chouzhou Street using the underpass that is fitted with escalators, the neighbourhood immediately encountered is known as Changchun. Changchun's eateries, hotels, and cargo companies mostly display signboards in Cyrillic that bear names such as 'Tashkent', 'Tiflis', 'Baku', 'Somon', and 'Chaikhana', and show maps with the routes used to deliver cargo to the Caucasus, the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the Central Asian republics. In an Uzbek restaurant located in this area of Yiwu, and over a bowl of mutton soup, Bahrom, a trader in his late 30s explains to me that he considers himself a 'successful' trader (*muafiq*; [he also clarifies in Russian *uspeshnyi*]).<sup>1</sup> Such success, Bahrom continues, is the result of his family's involvement in long-distance trade throughout generations.

Bahrom, a trader from Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe and who defines himself as Uzbek, has invited me to join him and his companions for dinner as I greeted them from the street

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while walking to the hotel 'Moscow', also located in Changchun. By that stage of my research (August 2016) I had known Bahrom for nearly six months, and often spent time with him and his father, Aka Akmal, as well as his visiting mother and other acquaintances in this area of Yiwu – a city in China's Zhejiang Province with about 2 million inhabitants of which, approximately, 14,000 are foreigners (cf. Introduction in this issue; Jacobs 2016; Marsden 2017; Pliez 2012).<sup>2</sup> I sit with Bahrom and his companions, including on this occasion his longstanding Uyghur friend visiting Yiwu from Urumqi along with his fiancé, and two Russian-speaking Han-Chinese friends who work as translators and commercial agents in Yiwu. In a conversation combining languages that are intelligible to us as a group of diners (Russian, Tajik, Uzbek, Uyghur and Mandarin), Bahrom continues to illustrate why he considers his family-business to be profitable and rewarding, even if, he clarifies, they also experienced 'bad' times.<sup>3</sup> Bahrom describes himself as one of the Central Asian traders who pioneered the region's commercial activities to Yiwu in the 2000s. He did this after having traded for several years between China and Tajikistan using the city of Urumqi in Xinjiang as a central node. Yet Urumqi, Bahrom boasts, is 'so close' to Tajikistan that 'everybody', including his 'grandmother', can 'easily' go from Dushanbe and buy goods. In contrast, Bahrom continues, Yiwu, two hours by train from Shanghai, is a city for more established merchants like him who have considerable experience, enough capital, and good knowledge of long-distance trade. Bahrom and other traders of similar background in Yiwu usually put an emphasis on their historical genealogies of merchants that have had an impact in their family business, and that precede their shuttle-trade enterprises in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> They share their family histories as well as their travel and commerce-related experiences during the everyday forms of sociality fostered in offices, cafes and restaurants in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood.

By stressing his experience in commerce that day, Bahrom is challenging the jokes that his Chinese companions and Uyghur friend have been cracking about him concerning a factory that supplied Bahrom bijouterie of a lower quality than the items for which he had paid. Although such stories of deceit orchestrated by Chinese suppliers are common in Yiwu and told by traders of all nationalities, the jokes in this specific context parallel the depictions that Russian-speaking Chinese, Uyghur and even Central Asian themselves often make about the unexperienced (*neopytnyi*) and stupid/naive (*tupoi*) nature of Central Asian and Russian traders, especially when compared to 'cunning' (*khitryi*) 'Arab' (*alabo*) traders who are recognized by many in Yiwu as some of the most skilful trading groups in the city and beyond.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Bahrom later on tells me, when compared to other prosperous traders in Yiwu, Central Asian merchants like him usually end up resembling the 'pitiful' (*bechora*) *chelnoki* or small-scale traders who carry their merchandise in suitcases. *Chelnoki* (shuttle [trader]) is a character from which Bahrom and traders of similar background who had established trading companies in Yiwu attempt to distance themselves. Paradoxically, these traders also recognize the extent to which such type of smaller scale trade in the 1990s was implicated in the effective up-scaling of their commercial activities from Urumqi to Yiwu.<sup>6</sup>

During my encounters with Bahrom, his father, as well as other Tajik and Uzbek traders in Yiwu, several questions puzzled me: If numerous Central Asian traders began their careers in the 1990s with the boom of the shuttle-trade from Istanbul or Urumqi, why do Bahrom and other Uzbek traders from Tajikistan make claims about the long history of their trading activities? How do their previous commercial experiences in the Soviet



era, and as traders in the 1990s play in their work and lives today, and in their self-perception as Uzbeks from Tajikistan? What type of phenomenon affords the possibilities of gathering together on a regular basis Russian-speaking Chinese and Uyghur traders, Uzbek and Tajik merchants and other people of similar backgrounds who work in Yiwu and are able to communicate in common languages? In other words, how are we to comprehend the particular arrangements of traders, intelligible languages, trans-regional legacies and diverse forms of shared sociality including stereotyping and mockery in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood? By focusing on Bahrom and his family's trading trajectory, I aim to respond to these questions by taking seriously Tajikistan's Uzbek merchants' assertions of belonging to a historical trading community rather than being 'newcomers' (*nawomada*) to long-distance trade. I will analyse these merchants' claims in connection with the concept of 'hierarchies of trade' in two present-day contexts: Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood, and Tajikistan, more particularly Dushanbe.

Hierarchies of trade refer to stratified angles and avenues that fashion traders' reputation, fame, wealth and location as they become articulated in specific contexts, and that turn out to be especially evident when traders compare their life and work to that of traders of different and/or their own national, ethnic and religious background with whom they interact (cf. Aslanian 2011; Greif 1989; Rabo 2005). The examination of the trading trajectories of merchants from Central Asia and their related historical linkages reflected in everyday sociality in Changchun put into question the extent to which we should see the 1990s as a central temporal frontier to all forms of trade involving actors of the former USSR (cf. introduction, Ibañez-Tirado 2015a, Skvirskaja in this issue). As well, there is a need for further considerations of the ways in which the experiences of trade during the USSR (ranging from those being categorized as semi-legal forms of commerce to others that involved smuggling) continue to bleed into forms of commerce important in the region today. The trading trajectories and genealogies of merchants such as Bahrom constitute part of these merchants' hierarchies of trade as articulated in Dushanbe and Yiwu, more particularly, in Changchun.

I suggest that the forms of conviviality enacted in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood are a reflection of the historical processes of endurance, disconnection and reconnection along the China-Russia-Central Asia zones of contact as now occurring in distinctive commercial hubs such as Yiwu; thus, everyday sociality in Changchun needs to be understood in terms of the multinational and transregional interactions that have occurred within the spaces of the former Soviet Union, and along the China-Russia and China-Central Asian borders. I also argue for a twofold relational model linking Yiwu and Dushanbe regarding hierarchies of trade. Not only in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood but also in Dushanbe, Bahrom's family's hierarchies of trade cut-across markers of identity that juxtapose the roles of Tajik and Uzbek communities in Tajikistan's contemporary politics and economics. Therefore, the hierarchies of trade of Uzbek merchants from Tajikistan in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood must be explicated in relationship to the context of contemporary political and economic affairs in Tajikistan. Against this background, Uzbek traders such as Bahrom express their inability to upgrade their commercial activities to more profitable sectors in Tajikistan as a form of marginalization due to their Uzbek identity. Equally, the hierarchies of trade articulated in Dushanbe by these Uzbek merchants cannot be disentangled from their hierarchies of trade as played out in Yiwu, more specifically during the everyday sociality that bring together a diverse range of Russian-speaking traders and agents in Changchun.

## Background: Tajikistan's Uzbek population and their commercial activities

Uzbeks constitute approximately 15.3% of Tajikistan's population (Fumagalli 2007), and the traders which whom I spoke cite language as the principal marker of their Uzbek identity. Although they are proficient in Tajik, Uzbek and Russian, they consider Uzbek their mother tongue and the preferred language to communicate in domestic spaces and amongst relatives, friends and associates who also speak Uzbek (cf. Finke 2014; Liu 2012). As it will be clearer throughout this article, the distinctiveness of what constitute Uzbek identity in Tajikistan is historically contingent and, on the level of everyday experience, is revealed as an unfixed category (cf. Hierman 2015). In terms of their economic activities in Tajikistan, Uzbek traders do not form a single trading group but, rather, constitute poly-stranded networks that are active in different niches of the country's economy (cf. Marsden 2016a). Uzbek traders I met in the northern city of Khujand, for example, import merchandise from Yiwu to northern Tajikistan via Uzbekistan using rail freight transport. With the goods stored in Khujand (usually in Atush and Somon bazaar), these merchants then conduct trans-border trade with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and also Russia in legal and semi-legal ways.

In Dushanbe, Uzbeks are popularly known by the city's dwellers for their key role in the city's restaurant sector, as well as in a range of new enterprises that involve, for example, the opening in the capital city of modernized supermarkets, wedding venues and indoor centres for children's leisure. Numerous Uzbek traders such as Bahrom usually own well-established whole-sale shops and warehouses in markets and bazaars (e.g., Kurbon, Sakhavod and Sulton Kabir bazaars in Dushanbe). Bahrom's family business mainly revolves around their running of wholesale shops and warehouses in different bazaars in Dushanbe and their trading company in Yiwu. They usually send their merchandise from Yiwu to Tajikistan by lorry via the Pamir highway and with the provision of a cargo company owned by Tajik traders from Dushanbe.<sup>7</sup>

The articulation of hierarchies of trade by Uzbek merchants from Tajikistan in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood and Dushanbe are positioned in relation to contemporary Tajikistan's politics especially concerning old and new processes of state-building and Tajik nationalism. At times, these processes are expressed in allegations of Tajik/Uzbek rivalry and other forms of internal regionalism that date from the formation of the Soviet republics onwards. The period between the Russian conquest of Central Asia's emirates and khanates and the formation of the USSR is the time at which the Tajik nation started to emerge through what Kassymbekova refers to as different 'tactics of governance' (2016, 2). These included the fashioning of new territorial boundaries, the resettlement of 'Tajik' people, and the ubiquitous promotion of 'Tajik' language, literature and folklore (cf. Abashin 2012; Reeves 2014). Even if in the late 1950s some Soviet scholars had problems differentiating Uzbeks and Tajiks through processes of self-reference (Bergne 2007; Hirsch 2005), Horák documents (2010, 72) how politicized academic discussions about the delimitations of Uzbek and Tajik identity involved intellectuals condemning those who supported pan-Turkism and later pan-Uzbekism as 'Tajik traitors' and 'Uzbekified Tajiks': they were accused of working in opposition to Tajikistan's territorial integrity after the 1920s. The ideological deprecation of Uzbek markers of identity in Tajikistan has been exacerbated in the post-independent era, as nationalist discourses are also informed by the regularly tense geopolitical relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan

over various themes that include the allocation of water and the Roghun Dam project (Ibañez-Tirado 2015b), the historical sources of Tajikistan's territory, culture and statehood (Horák 2010; Ilkhamov 2004; Kamoliddin 2006), and the ownership of the historical cities of Bukhara and Samarkand.

It is not the purpose of this article to theorize Uzbek identity/ethnicity. Rather, this article adds to this body of scholarship by examining how ideological debates are reflected in the sociality among traders of Tajik and Uzbek background in China and Tajikistan. In Dushanbe, in a context where a clear-cut Tajik identity is constantly signalled by the exclusive promotion of Tajik history, 'race' and language fostered by government institutions, experienced Uzbek traders such as Bahrom *perceive* themselves as being incapable of keeping the growth of their commercial activities because of their underprivileged position as Tajikistan's citizens of Uzbek background. Bahrom's explanations on the lines of marginalization, however, are not fully accountable for Bahrom's and his family's commercial stagnation in Dushanbe. Such explanations are also related to the ways in which hierarchies of trade are played out in Yiwu's Chagnchun neighbourhood. Before analysing aspects of everyday sociality in Changchun, I now provide a summary of Bahrom's family's history as narrated to me by Bahrom himself and his father, Aka Akmal.

### Trading genealogies: the case of Bahrom's family

Bahrom's trading genealogy started with Aka Akmal's deceased father, whom they said, had already learned to trade from his father before the Soviet period in the Ferghana Valley in the beginning of the twentieth century – although they did not have details about what their commercial activities had involved. Their merchant lineage moved in the present to Bahrom as the most skilful of Aka Akmal's offspring, yet also included Bahrom's brothers, his two sisters (in their early twenties) and his mother who also owned a shop and thus visited Yiwu and Guagzhou twice a year. Bahrom and Aka Akmal usually placed a strong emphasis on the role of their family as an entity whose members cooperated with one another, that had learned about commerce throughout generations, and that suffered the perils of long-distance trade and enjoyed its benefits together – even if conflict and misunderstandings over money and products were common.

Bahrom's paternal grandparents arrived in Tajikistan in the 1950s from Margilan, a town located in the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan. Bahrom's grandfather studied agronomy in Tashkent, and, after graduating, was relocated to Dushanbe where he worked in a series of water and agricultural projects, including several schemes for developing flower cultivation (especially roses and chrysanthemums). Aka Akmal, told me that although his family had not experienced economic problems, his father began to complement the family income with the sale of flowers grown in his garden. He used to take one or two boxes of flowers to Moscow where they commanded a good price: 'By the time my father began his work-related trips (*komandirovka*) to Moscow we were experts in growing and keeping flowers fresh.'

During the Soviet period Aka Akmal became a lorry-driver and drove between Tajikistan and Russia a *kamaz* (a type of Soviet-manufactured lorry) loaded with fresh and canned fruit and vegetables. A few years later, and with the help of his father, he became involved

in the authorized transport (mainly by air) of flowers from Tajikistan to Moscow. In the early 1980s, by which point Bahrom was already 4 or 5 years old, Aka Akmal began to travel to New Delhi and Bangladesh to acquire flowers in authorized procurement journeys; he later traded some of these flowers in Soviet Russia in semi-legal ways (c.f. Lajipathi Rai 1991).<sup>8</sup> During these trips, he became acquainted with Indian merchants who were interested in buying gold: Aka Akmal not only bought flowers in South Asia, but also started to sell gold jewellery that he personally had acquired from families in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In those years Bahrom, the eldest of Aka Akmal's six children, also started to trade flowers and textiles brought from India by his father firstly in his neighbourhood and sometime later in central Dushanbe.

Both Aka Akmal and Bahrom remembered that during Tajikistan's civil war (1992–1998) life in Dushanbe was hard not just because of the violence but also as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic crisis. Aka Akmal stopped travelling to Russia, India and Bangladesh, but started to drive to Regar, a small town close to the Tajik-Uzbek border. He became involved in purchasing 'everything' (*harchis* – e.g., goods of everyday use) in the border town and in the transport of these to Dushanbe – a journey that, as he recalled to me, meant he needed to interact with military and police checkpoints, bandits, and bullets flying in all directions. Bahrom, by then in his early teens, started to sell cigarettes that he procured from Afghan traders working in Dushanbe; by the end of the Tajik civil war (when roads were safer to travel along), he accompanied his father to Regar to buy smuggled petrol to Tajikistan from Uzbekistan. Aka Akmal transported the petrol in larger quantities to buyers in Dushanbe and beyond; at the same time, along with two of his friends (*jura*), he also became involved in the business of scrap metal (*metalicheskii lom*) and copper (*med'*). He explained to me:

There were broken cars and old pipes and cables dumped here and there. I transported some of this stuff to my yard. I think it was 1994 or so, an Uzbek friend of mine who had worked in East Germany came with a German friend to Dushanbe. This man was interested in scrap metal especially copper. He had a company there. We became business partners.

The business of scrap metal and copper had been so profitable for Bahrom's family that having only pursued this line of business for three or four years they generated enough profit to last for six years. They bought land to build a grand family house, land for each of Aka Akmal's children, shops in the newly opened Sakhovad bazaar and land for a holiday house in the outskirts of Dushanbe. At the same time, Aka Akmal travelled to Urumqi for the first time in 1997, initially to procure batteries and small electronics, and, after some years, also mobile phones. In 2000 Bahrom travelled with his father to Urumqi to buy jewellery and cosmetics, a trade that he had himself launched. The year after, Bahrom's mother, who had previously managed the family's shops in Dushanbe, also began to travel to Urumqi thereby becoming active in selecting new and fashionable designs for their products. In 2006, Bahrom made friends with a wealthy Uyghur man from Urumqi who was starting a building company in Xinjiang, but whose wife was living in Yiwu. He invited Bahrom to travel to Yiwu with him. Bahrom remembers:

I call my father and tell him 'I am flying to Yiwu.' He tells me 'you don't have my permission'. He had never been there himself and did not know my new Uyghur friend. He was afraid that something bad could happen to me. In those times, we used to carry lots of cash. We have a fight over the phone. I travel to Yiwu and call him from there again. He is very angry

about my disobedience. I tell him "Father! You don't know how many things are sold here and at what prices! He hangs up the phone. I return to Dushanbe one week later, and when our goods arrive he is astonished. I bought so many beautiful things that we had never seen in Urumqi, and that customers had not seen in Dushanbe. We made a huge profit then."

Bahrom and his father travelled to Yiwu twice a year between 2006 and 2012. In 2013 Bahrom finally decided to open his own trading company in Yiwu and to live most of the time in China. Bahrom was married in Dushanbe and he and his wife had two children, yet he wanted to expand his family business by supplying his and his family's shops, and by working as an agent for the 'inexperienced' 'newcomers' from Tajikistan who had begun to travel from Urumqi to Yiwu. Bahrom's clients usually stayed in Yiwu one or two weeks, placed orders and went back to Dushanbe to wait for the delivery which usually took between 40 and 60 days. Bahrom's company helped them to find suppliers in Yiwu (usually in Futian market), inspected the merchandise once delivered by suppliers, arranged the documents required for exporting, and placed the goods in a cargo company. Using the name of his company, at times Bahrom also obtained for his clients goods on credit in Futian.

By narrating their family's trading trajectory, Bahrom and Aka Akmal emphasized the skills and knowledge they had learnt from one another and from Bahrom's grandfather. Besides, the knowledge and experience related to short and long-distance commerce throughout generations were the principal markers of the hierarchies of trade that Bahrom's family employed to build a reputation for themselves in Yiwu. As a family of Uzbek traders, they have learnt how to work with different lines of products and in diverse and often changing political contexts within Tajikistan and abroad; they also highlighted the ways in which they had not only survived, but also thrived in times of war. In the sixteen years that Bahrom had travelled between China and Tajikistan, he had achieved a good command of Chinese and Uyghur language, in addition to Russian and Tajik which he spoke fluently since his childhood. These skills and experiences, he said, allowed him to foster a good reputation in Yiwu and to attract new clientele. Building a good reputation involved efforts usually made in the convoluted sociality among traders, agents and clients in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood.

### **Hierarchies of trade in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood**

In Yiwu hierarchies of trade, or the multifaceted avenues that traders articulate in relation to one another to build or maintain a reputable name, are usually expressed in terms of the traders' wealth and character, time of arrival to China and country of origin (Anderson in this issue; Belguidoum and Pliez 2015; Marsden 2016b; Skvirskaja in this issue). The foreign merchants who arrived earlier to China in the 1990s, and have established trading companies there might be in a better position than those who began to trade in more recent times; and those traders who run big companies with enough liquidity and clean credit-history are perceived as being more trustworthy than those traders who run companies based on the brokerage of credit from Chinese suppliers (cf. Anderson in this issue). At times, traders measure the size and reputation of their companies regarding the number of containers they export: whilst Bahrom's small company shipped half or one container every four/six weeks to Tajikistan, other companies ran by Afghans or Palestinians, for example, are able to ship an average of 30 containers per month. Hence,

traders of recognized historical networks such as those of Arab, Indian and Afghan background in Yiwu are spoken about as being more reliable, skilful and thus prosperous than minor traders such as those of Russian or Central Asian background. Finally, hierarchies of trade are also expressed by, and discussed among traders on a day-to-day basis in Yiwu in relationship to the cars, offices, furniture and clothing they have and display, as well as their overall conduct in both the market-place and the spaces of leisure such as restaurants, cafes and nightclubs.

Foreign merchants in Yiwu aim to build or maintain a respectable position in the hierarchies of trade for different reasons which include attracting new clientele, business associates and even intimate companions; obtaining goods on credit, better prices or speed deliveries from Chinese suppliers, and modelling themselves as specific types of persons throughout their trading careers. The last aspect might include shaping oneself as a pious, cosmopolitan, modern, patriotic or morally-informed subject in relationship to specific understandings of religion, gender and age that vary according to the trader's place of origin, life-trajectory and particular aspirations. In Bahrom's and his family's case, their claims to their historical participation in trade are one of the multiple ways in which hierarchies of trade are articulated; as Rabo (2005) has shown for traders in Aleppo, claims to a reputable genealogy in commerce is part of how traders' build up a name. In Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood, Bahrom and other Uzbek traders from Tajikistan emphasize their historic role as merchants in order to show to others that they are not inexperienced or new to commerce – as Russians and Central Asians are depicted by themselves and others as being. A day in Changchun involves the following vignettes.

Bahrom's office in Yiwu is located under a signboard in Cyrillic announcing the routes of a cargo company from Yiwu to Tashkent, Osh and beyond. There is also a map of Russia, Central Asia and China painted on the wall that, together with the numerous motorbikes that are parked in the vicinity, serves as an urban landscape for foreign and local traders in their way to Yiwu's Futian market. An Uyghur shop whose owner greets clients in Russian and Uzbek sits next to a Russian bakery whose owners arrived eight years ago to Yiwu from Vladivostok; and a Russian-speaking Han-Chinese who grew up in Khabarovsk in the late 1990s and works as a translator and agent in Yiwu has a casual chat with Sonya, a Russian woman from Vladivostok who recently opened a cargo company in the city and who says that she felt attracted to business because her grand-grandfather (who was married to a Chinese woman) traded in China in the early twentieth century. In the evenings, Sonya closes her office and greets Bahrom and his father with her hand, but does not usually spend time with these men. Bahrom and his father gather with their friends (mainly other Uzbek, Tajik and Uyghur male traders and restaurateurs) to drink tea, smoke cigarettes and play *takht* – a board game similar to backgammon – nearby Sonya's office. Sonya refers to Bahrom and his father as 'respectful' traders, but she also clarifies that she prefers to rent a flat in a 'good' area of Yiwu far from Changchun: Sonya finds this neighbourhood intimidating and dangerous at night when, she says, drunken Chinese men, wealthy Azeri macho-bravado with expensive cars and motorbikes, and 'unmannered' (*nevospitannye*) Central Asians harass Russian women like her, making rude and inappropriate remarks in the streets.

Not far from Sonya's office, in a nearby Armenian cafeteria, Larisa, a Russian waitress from eastern Ukraine, explains to me that her former employer, a Tajik man who owned



a restaurant on the other side of the road, was abusive and harassed her. Larisa feels safer in her current job with 'cultured' Armenian traders who frequent this locale and who also speak Russian. The Tajik man who allegedly mistreated Larisa is also associated with a cargo company, jointly owned by a Russian-speaking Chinese man and his Russian partner: the company provides service to Russia, Ukraine and the Caucasus and gives the Tajik restaurateur a small commission for sending new clients. The Tajik restaurateur thus tells me that Larisa lies about his rude behaviour because the truth is that she attempted to 'steal' his Russian clients (mainly new traders on their first trip to Yiwu) and direct those to her husband's recently opened cargo-company. According to this Tajik and his Russian-speaking Han-Chinese friend, this new Ukrainian cargo-company is unsuccessful and unreliable – otherwise, they ask, why does Larisa need to work as a waitress? The Tajik and Chinese men conclude that, after all, Ukrainians are 'stupid' (*tupye*) in matters related to business. Another day Bahrom tells me that he does not know who to believe in this story – as gossip has spread out in Changchun about the unscrupulous behaviour of the Tajik restaurateur. The important issue for Bahrom, he says, is that unfortunately the restaurateur ends up giving a bad name to other traders from Tajikistan. This has implications for the reputation of small companies such as Bahrom's, as he also relies on finding new Russian-speaking clients from beyond Tajikistan in Changchun who need a translator and agent to accompany them to Futian Market.

Yiwu is a new commercial city which arose through a combination of the entrepreneurship spirit of its inhabitants and the policies of Zhejiang authorities in projecting Yiwu and its markets as the worldwide hub of small commodities (Jacobs 2016). The stories of everyday sociality in Changchun, and the types of conviviality fashioned in diverse urban spaces within Yiwu demonstrate that the potentials of people to cluster and associate to one another are only partially inflected by the more recent history of Yiwu and the local government's efforts in shaping the city as highly attractive to foreign traders (Rui in this issue). In the context of China's grand initiatives such as the New Silk Road, the Eurasian Bridge and the Belt and Road, scholars have discussed how diverse populations and trading networks have been moving, working and operating along these routes (to different pace and degrees) without the alleged provision of such newly-flanged grand schemes (e.g., Chang 2012; Karrar 2016; Marsden 2017). Equally, Changchun neighbourhood responds to profounder historical processes that overlap these initiatives, yet also supersede them and the city. The merchants' claims to reputable trajectories as ways of playing out their hierarchies of trade respond, to certain extent, to historical processes beyond Yiwu that had produced throughout centuries the possibilities of certain languages, ethnic/national categories and their stereotypes as being mutually intelligible and recognisable to one another. In this regard, Changchun reflects the multinational character of the former Soviet Union, as well as the historical encounters of diverse multi-ethnic populations that included labourers and merchants along the China-Russia-Central Asian border regions in the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>9</sup> These revived forms of sociality can be undoubtedly seen in the languages spoken in Changchun, as well as in the stereotypes of traders and related personnel from disparate nationalities every so often the topic of conversations over dinner after a long day of walking in Yiwu's Futian market. These may include Russians deriding their Russian-speaking Chinese agents who frequently hail from the Heilongjiang province and grew up listening or learning Russian language (cf. Fedorova 2013). They are said to have incomprehensible accents



and to be 'dirty' (*griaznye*) and untrustworthy.<sup>10</sup> In return, these Chinese agents often express their scorn for Russian traders: men are portrayed as being 'rude' (*grubyi*) and 'alcoholic' (*alkash*), and women, although very beautiful, are said to be capricious (*kapriznye*). Besides, Russians are said to be unable to learn a word in Mandarin even if they had worked and purchased their merchandises in China for decades (cf. Fedorova 2011).

In this context, Bahrom's claims that Uzbek traders from Tajikistan, such as himself and his father, have a long pedigree in commerce constitutes an aspect of their efforts at shaping a good reputation for themselves in the face of recurrent accusations, often in joking tones, by Russian-speaking Chinese and Uyghurs that Central Asians are beginners. Tajikistan's Uzbek trader usually attempt to contest other allegations in Changchun about not having enough capital to conduct businesses of bigger scale such as exporting numerous containers every week (as Azeri trader and Uzbekistan's citizens are said of being able to do); opening cargo companies in Yiwu with their own lorries (as Russian-speaking Han Chinese are alleged to own), or factories in China (as 'Arabs' are spoken about as establishing). They also have to navigate the negative stereotypes surrounding Central Asian men by Russian-speaking independent traders visiting the city. Some of them arrive to Yiwu in organized shopping-tours from Russian cities, and are familiar with Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz in their capacity of underprivileged labour-migrants working abroad. Bahrom's emphasis on his family reputation as merchants, and the necessity of displaying an upright comportment in Changchun on a daily basis are vital for him to attract Russian-speaking traders as his clients, to obtain merchandises on credit for them from Futian, and more broadly, to make his company thrive in such a competitive and unforgiving environment. Attracting new clients and business ventures, however, implies different types of risks as now I analyse.

### **New clients: risk, debt and losing face in Yiwu**

In April 2017 I met Bahrom again, this time in Dushanbe. His company in Yiwu had shut down four months earlier, and having failed to renew his Chinese visa, he had been forced to go back to live in Tajikistan. His wholesale bijouterie shops in Dushanbe's Kurbon bazaar were still operating successfully, and his father and mother were still able to obtain short-term China visas to return to Yiwu for the short trips they needed to make in order to supply their shops with new products. All in all, however, Bahrom's company in Yiwu had brought him a considerable loss in monetary terms, as well as problems with clients and family, and a damaged reputation with some of his Chinese suppliers. Bahrom then proceeded to recall his experiences over the last four months.

Bahrom's work with the handful of clients he had established in Yiwu generated enough income to send money to Dushanbe, and to maintain his company that incurred expenses such as the rent of a small office and a flat in Changchun. At times, however, it was the profit in Dushanbe's bazaars that paid for his expenses in Yiwu. Then, Bahrom was often questioned by his wife and parents about why he did not want to return to Dushanbe. It was under such family pressure that in May 2016 Bahrom took risks with the aim of making big profits and stop his family's questions about his choice to live abroad. Bahrom met Shodijon, a Dushanbe-based trader born in Kulob, southern Tajikistan. Shodijon had arrived in Yiwu from Guangzhou, and was on his first trip to the city. Shodijon was a civil engineer working in a reputed building company in Tajikistan,

allegedly ran by a member of the presidential family also from Kulob. In recent years, Shodijon oversaw the procurement of pipes and cables from China for a new building-project of apartment compounds in Tajikistan's capital. The trips to China were paid by the company he worked for, yet, at the same time, Shodijon also began trading independently: in addition to procuring goods for the company, he bought merchandise to sell to his clients in Dushanbe's Sulton Kabir bazaar, a market that specializes in construction material. Shodijon told Bahrom that one of his friends, a wealthy businessman, had begun working in quarries in Tajikistan and would supply materials for the building company he worked for: he invited Bahrom to be part of the business on condition that he helped him to buy in China five stone crushing machines. Bahrom had no previous knowledge of Shodijon, but believed in his credentials as an engineer, the employee of a recognized company, and a newly established independent trader. As he was not familiar with this type of equipment, Bahrom spent more than two weeks conducting research about crushing machines and visiting several factories. Bahrom decided on a supplier based near to Beijing who sold him the crushing machines at a price of US\$4300 each; Bahrom then sold the machines to Shodijon for US\$5000 each plus the expenses of transportation to Tajikistan.

A profit of about US\$3500 in a couple of weeks was worth the hazard, Bahrom explained to me, because working for a client buying in Futian market for a week usually brought him no more than US\$100–200 as a commission for placing orders. The risks of this business, however, included Bahrom's lack of experience in machinery: he could easily have been deceived in price and quality by the manufacturer. The second and most important risk was the fact that Bahrom had to pay for the machines in China and recover his money once the machines arrived in Dushanbe. Bahrom did not have enough money to pay for five machines, so he paid for three and took two on a credit agreement that required him to pay the remaining dues to the supplier within three months. The machines arrived in Dushanbe in the summer of 2016 and Shodijon took the machines away, but did not pay off his debts to Bahrom as agreed. Bahrom called him persistently; Bahrom's father and brothers put Shodijon under pressure by visiting his house and working place and directly requesting the money. After a couple of months during which Shodijon had promised to pay for the machines, he began to threaten Bahrom: Shodijon alleged that the machines were faulty and he would therefore not pay his debt. Finally, Shodijon went into hiding. At the same time, Bahrom had lost the money he invested in three machines and had the Chinese supplier putting pressure on him to pay the remaining funds in China.

In such a desperate situation and without enough clients, Bahrom decided to close his office in Yiwu and return to Dushanbe to live from the profit of his whole-sale shops. If he wanted to return to China, he had to make enough money to pay for his debt with the supplier near Beijing as, apparently, he had already 'stained' Bahrom's name in Yiwu. Because Bahrom found this supplier through the advice of Russian-speaking Chinese acquaintances in Yiwu, the factory's owner spread the word amongst these same acquaintances that Bahrom had fled the city without paying his debts. He also posted Bahrom's details via WeChat and other internet-based platforms of social media where Chinese suppliers and factory owners usually name and shame foreign traders who run away without paying their debts –apparently with the aim of preventing other suppliers providing old debtors with credit. In addition, Bahrom's shops in Kurbon bazaar were not producing

enough profit as in previous years: the exchange rate of the Tajik somoni in relation to the dollar was fluctuating and reducing the profit margins made on the sale of goods imported from China. Bahrom described his situation to me as being at its lowest ever.

In this context, Bahrom and his father expressed their frustrations about being unable to up-grade their trading activities towards the sectors where 'real money' was to be made in Tajikistan: construction and machinery. They told me that 'newcomers' such as Shodijon and especially from Tajikistan's Kulob region were benefiting from their kinship ties and alliances with the presidential family. The questions surrounding Shodijon's case and Bahrom's sense of marginalization are evoked as being related to the status of Uzbeks as a minority in contemporary Tajikistan, as well as to the current political outline of Tajikistan's state lead by President Rahmon and his family. Tajikistan's President, in power since 1992, portrays himself and his family as Tajiks hailing from the country's south (Kulob region, more specifically Danghara); this ruling elite have positioned their companies and enterprises in the main sectors of the economy in the past two decades.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, Kulobi identity and government-led ideas of the 'purity' of the Tajik 'race' have flourished as a symbol of government authority. On the other, negative stereotypes of Kulobis have been popularized among non-Kulobi population; thus Kulobis have come to be regarded as symbols of intimidation and the unmerited appropriation of the country's resources, aspects of life in the country referred by some scholars as 'Kulyabisation' (cf. Fumagalli 2007; Marsden 2012).<sup>12</sup>

Against this background, Bahrom and his family alleged that companies owned by people from Kulob were usually given the permissions to build new apartment blocks in the capital, and also obtained government contracts for other public projects. As traders of Uzbek rather than Tajik background, Bahrom and his family could not win a contract to supply such companies with building materials even if they demonstrably had the capacity, experience and connections to purchase all types of goods in China and beyond. They boasted that their contacts included old acquaintances in Russia and India, as well as their old business partners in Germany, but that there was no space for them in Tajikistan's market. Finally, they concluded that Bahrom's undertaking with the crushing machines had failed not because Bahrom had been stupid or inexperienced, but because Kulobis 'protect one another' and therefore, Shodijon had been able to hide himself whilst being protected from 'above'.<sup>13</sup>

My encounters with traders from the Kulob region involved in the purchase of building material, only partially confirmed the perceptions held by Bahrom and his family. These encounters further problematize simplistic notions of clear-cut differences between Tajik and Uzbek identities in Tajikistan. In Kulob city I spoke to a Tajik man who worked for a famous company that ran petrol stations in Tajikistan and that has direct links to the presidential family. Although he said that he did not act as an independent trader, but as an expert advisor on the type of goods required for this line of business, he usually travelled to China to procure the necessary goods and materials for the maintenance of the petrol pumps. Another man from the town of Vose', also in Kulob region, told me that he had gained a government contract to supply building materials for the new stadium that was being built in Vose' with the sponsorship of the regional and national government. He explained to me that the contract has been given to him because of his friendship with the owners of the company in charge of the construction project – who also happened to be related to the presidential family. Yet, he emphasized

additionally that he had a long experience of working in China: having commenced trading in Urumqi in the 1990s, he married a Uyghur woman (he divorced her 8 years later). Over more than ten years, he had been involved in the import of building materials purchased from Uyghur suppliers to Tajikistan. Although he described himself as Tajik, he told me that his mother was Uzbek, and that he had grown up speaking the Uzbek language in the village near Vose' where he spent his childhood. Indeed, in the Kulob region there are numerous villages and towns well-known for their families of mixed Uzbek and Tajik background.

These cases demonstrate that Bahrom's claims of being unable to up-grade his business towards a more profitable sector is indeed related to the patron-client relations in which Tajikistan's politics and economics evolve. Yet, as the last case elucidates, the identity of Uzbeks in Tajikistan is fluid and cannot be pinned down to something that is exclusive and well-bounded, and thus that can be used to one-dimensionally explain why Bahrom and his family are unable to enter the business in building materials. These claims also need to be understood in terms of the articulation of hierarchies of trade within both Tajikistan and Yiwu: marginalization on the grounds of being Uzbek were partly deployed as a way of defending Bahrom's and his family's reputation as experienced, skilful and honest traders at moments in which they were forced to close their company in Yiwu. Assertions of marginalization on identity lines allowed them to preserve a respectable name among other traders in both Changchun and Dushanbe in a period when they were being described by others as having 'lost face' in China due to Bahrom's miscalculations and his resulting unpaid debt.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have revealed how Bahrom's grandfather traded flowers during the Soviet period to Moscow; Aka Akmal's traded flowers and gold to India and Bangladesh and scrap metal to Germany; Bahrom and his parents conducted shuttle-trade activities in Urumqi before finally Bahrom was able to establish his company in Yiwu. These trading trajectories are embedded in the ways in which hierarchies of trade aim at building a respectable reputation for this evolving merchant family. Very importantly, these types of histories indicate that although the wave of shuttle-trade of the 1990s evidences the salience of new forms of commerce and mobility at the end of the Soviet era, ethnographic investigations on contemporary long-distance trade in the post-socialist realm demand a careful consideration of the historical depth of the zones of contact and exchange that precede the twentieth century. Given the diversity in the trading activities of Tajikistan's Uzbeks, this article is unable to make generalizations about the trading activities of this 'minority' as a whole, or their commercial strength in Tajikistan more generally. Yet, by presenting Bahrom's family's trajectory and locating their history in the socio-economic and political context of Tajikistan today, I hope to stimulate further research about Central Asia's Uzbek merchants, and their role in trade across the region as well as with China (e.g., Balci 2003; Sahadeo 2011).

The warming up of bilateral relations between China and the Soviet Union from 1983, combined with the economic growth of China, the demise of the Soviet Union and the more recent initiatives such as the New Silk Road, the Eurasian Bridge and the Belt and Road have enabled, to an extent, the movement and interaction of peoples of different

backgrounds from China, Central Asia and Russia – often with the purposes of trade. In addition to these relatively new processes, I have suggested that the forms of conviviality enacted in Changchun as well as the way in which traders such as Bahrom position themselves within Yiwu's hierarchies of trade need to be understood in terms of the previous historical and multinational contacts that have occurred within the spaces of the former Soviet Union, as well as along the China-Russia and China-Central Asian borders. In the context of Yiwu, I have argued that the articulation of hierarchies of trade in Changchun neighbourhood is shaped in everyday sociality and in response to the mockery uttered by Uyghurs, Russian-speaking Chinese and other Russian-speaking traders more broadly who, at times, depict Central Asians merchants as stupid, unexperienced or uneducated.

Finally, the articulation of Bahrom's hierarchies of trade in Tajikistan emphasizes this family's Uzbek background and their historical pedigree as traders in contrast to depictions of Tajik 'newcomers' – inexperienced traders lacking merit who usually, although not always, were referred as to hailing from Tajikistan's Kulob region and thus alleged to have connections and protection from the political elites who control the access to Tajikistan's resources and most profitable companies. On the one hand, Shodijon, the man who cheated Bahrom and was thus implicated in the demise of his company in Yiwu, benefitted from the patronage of an unidentified figure in Tajikistan able to let him escape without paying off his debts. On the other hand, those company-based and independent traders from the Kulob region might be able to identify themselves or their ancestors as Uzbek in some contexts. So, this is not a straightforward story of regionalism or Tajik/Uzbek rivalry. Bahrom's assertions about being unable to up-grade his business to the more profitable construction companies reflect Tajikistan's economic and political affairs today, but his claims about the patronage of the 'newcomers' were also a way in which he attempted to recuperate his reputation as a good trader after the great risks and miscalculations he had taken in Yiwu with the crushing machines. After all, Bahrom was foreseeing the continuation of his trading activities, and also expressed a desire of returning to live in China – possibly Yiwu.

## Notes

1. Words in brackets are in Tajik and Russian language. Following anthropological convention I have used pseudonyms for all people referred to in this text.
2. I conducted 7 months of fieldwork in Yiwu, China (2016), and one month in Tajikistan (2017). The research methods include participant observation, open-ended interviews, and mapping of Yiwu's neighbourhoods and markets, and Dushanbe's bazaars.
3. Bahrom is fluent in all these languages, and we all communicate with one another in Russian. At points during our encounters, Bahrom switched to communicate with me in Tajik, to his Chinese friends in Mandarin, and to his Uyghur associates in Uyghur and Uzbek.
4. The number of traders from Tajikistan operating in Yiwu are relatively small in comparison to other major trading networks in the city. In 2016, there were three well-established trading and cargo companies and two restaurants from Tajikistan in Yiwu. I spoke with approximately thirty male and female traders from Tajikistan in Yiwu both of Uzbek and Tajik background. The great majority of them were temporary visitors to Yiwu who stayed on business trips usually lasting little more than two weeks.
5. People in Yiwu use the generic *alabo* (Arab in Mandarin) to refer to traders from the Middle East. My interlocutors that night mentioned that among the *alabo* they knew, Iraqi, Syrian and Yemeni traders are the most reputable and successful.

6. For an analysis of 'shuttle-trade' (*chelnoki*) from the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of socialism see: Humphrey (1999), Özcan (2010), Piart (2013), Spector (2017). For an examination on how these practices became to be associated to semi-legal and shameful forms of trade see: Holzhlehner (2014); Mukhina (2009); Niyozov and Shamatov (2006), Humphrey and Skvirskaja (2009), Humphrey and Mandel (2002).
7. On the Pamir Highway and related commercial routes see: Mostowlansky (2017), chapter 2.
8. Flowers were of great importance in the Soviet Union. Giving flowers in special occasions and during festivities such as Women's Day was a symbol of, and a practice aiming at shaping 'civilized' and loyal Soviet subjects and citizens. Therefore, lavish displays of flowers were also salient aspects of military parades and related commemorations.
9. For an examination of the diverse populations that migrated from China to Russia and from Russia to China in the nineteenth century see Datsyshen (2012), Peshkov (2018), Holzhlehner (2014). For the migration of Chinese citizens to Central Asia in the twentieth century see Sadovskaya (2012), and for the multi-national encounters among traders in the China-Central Asian borders in the twentieth century see: Alff (2016), Steenberg (2016), Parham (2016).
10. For an analysis of negative stereotypes surrounding Chinese workers and merchants in Russia from the nineteenth century see Billé (2012), Holzhlehner (2014), Peshkov (2018), Ryzhova (2018), Skvirskaja (this issue).
11. For a more thorough analysis of how Tajikistan's companies are not simply co-opted by elite networks, but also involve global actors such as multinational corporations and international donor agencies see Heathershaw (2011).
12. The majority of people from Kulob do not have contacts with the ruling family and have not directly benefited from the current Kulobi elites within the Tajik government (see Ibañez-Tirado 2015b).
13. For a discussion on patron-client relations and patronage in Tajikistan see Ibañez-Tirado (forthcoming).

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## 'Russian merchant' legacies in post-Soviet trade with China: Moral economy, economic success and business innovation in Yiwu

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# 'Russian merchant' legacies in post-Soviet trade with China: Moral economy, economic success and business innovation in Yiwu

Vera Skvirskaia 

## ABSTRACT


This article focuses on Russian traders operating in China, particularly in Yiwu, the major commercial hub for the 'small commodity' trade, and explores the idea of the 'Russian merchant' prevalent in Russia today. Rather than examining the new commercial culture from the perspective of global neoliberalism, it deals with Russia's pre-Soviet merchant estate (*soslovie*) and its present-day political-ideological evocations. While there is no direct cultural-professional continuity between pre-Soviet and post-Soviet merchants, some similarities have come to the fore and have been encouraged by the state and the Church. This is due to the promotion of a particular moral economy wherein the 'Russian merchant' figures as a positive category. Using a case study of a Russian trader in Yiwu, the article illustrates the new ways in which mistrust as well as 'traditional' merchant attributes such as patriotism and patriarchal authority, have been harnessed to create a successful Russian transnational business.

## KEYWORDS

Merchant estate; patriotism; commerce; mistrust; Phalanstery

## Introduction

During the final years of the Soviet state, a mass of ordinary and not-so-ordinary citizens from different professional and social backgrounds entered the novel sphere of entrepreneurship. Since popular Soviet understandings that the market principle 'buy cheap, sell dear' designated immoral illegal 'speculation' (*spekuliatsia*) held sway (see Humphrey 2002a; Ries 2002), the figures of late Soviet and early post-Soviet market traders gave rise to contrasting new images of commercial activities. On the one hand, trade (*torgovlia*) was associated with sheer necessity and the 'fall from grace' of those involved in it. The new commercial actors-cum-'victims-of-market-reforms' included former teachers, clerks, engineers, and workers who were trading on the market or had street stalls or became suitcase/shuttle traders (*chelnoki*), regularly crossing national borders. An ultimate urban icon of victimisation was the impoverished pensioner-trader – 'the grandma' (*babushka*, although men also participated) – reselling things bought or found elsewhere next to bus stops and metro stations. On the other hand, trade stood for the (illegitimate) wealth and success of the new heterogeneous stratum of businessmen and entrepreneurs (from *kooperatory* and *kommersanty* to *biznesmeny* and *ferмеры*). Privatised industrial

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enterprises and new private farmers turned to trade as their main economic activity. This development invited analogies with ('pre-modern') mercantile capitalism (see e.g., Burawoy and Krotov 1993). Many of those who could successfully navigate in this new field of commerce were *nomenklatura* (i.e., former Party/Komsomol administrators and activists, the Soviet managerial class) and black-market operators – the representatives of the last Soviet generation who acquired particular entrepreneurial and organisational skills under the 'entrepreneurial governmentality' of state socialism (see e.g., Yurchak 2002). These individuals thus became the 'mediators between the two eras' (Lipovetsky 2003, 70): late socialism (or Soviet 'stagnation') and late capitalism Russian-style where economic survival (let alone flourishing) and ethical life were seen as being incompatible.

The different popular associations attached to commercial activities, which still linger on in Russian society, also indicate that participation in trade has been experienced as humiliation and professional denigration by some and as promising and exciting opportunities by others.<sup>1</sup> Besides documenting the crisis of values and popular scorn of capitalist traders and business people, anthropologists and other scholars have offered insightful analyses of the complex ways in which post-Soviet business and discursive practices have taken shape and have shaped new entrepreneurial actors. While post-Soviet practices have been shown to owe a great deal to Soviet 'hybrid logic' of the official and personalised public spheres, unwritten rules of networking and hierarchies of belonging (e.g., Radaev 2002; Yurchak 2002; Ledeneva 2009),<sup>2</sup> new discursive constructs of being an 'entrepreneur of oneself' have, by contrast, been linked to global neo-liberalism and its models of successful living (e.g., Yurchak 2003; Hemment 2015, esp. p. 175). In this way, these approaches situate the heterogeneous category of the post-Soviet trader or new Russian entrepreneur at the intersection of Soviet legacies and global neoliberal capitalism.

Following in these tracks, this article engages with new practices and ethical orientations of the post-Soviet transnational trader, but it also does so with the help of the moral economy approach. The ethnographic object is the small-scale, individual Russian entrepreneurs supplying Russia, but sometimes also other destinations, with cheap Chinese commodities. From the early 1990s onwards, commercial routes linking Russia and China and beyond have been developed by actors whom we tend to associate with 'globalization from below', and, as Matthews, Lins Ribeiro, and Alba Vega (2012, 11) noted, who are often 'out-neoliberalizing' global corporations by trying to operate below the radar of state regulations. In particular, the article considers the success story of a former petty trader from a Russian industrial city in the Urals who has made his fortune in Yiwu, China, highlighting the fluid and porous boundaries between 'globalisation from below' and 'globalisation from above'. It is in this context that the perspective of moral economy is pertinent because it allows us to bring under the same analytical framework different but entangled regimes of value (cf. Palomera and Vetta 2016): those driven by the state, those inspired by 'opportunistic' neoliberalism and those embedded in particular cultural dispositions. As anthropologists have recently argued, moral economy should be understood as an inherently syncretic perspective, i.e., combining different logics, (e.g., de Sardan 1999), that is not restricted to a specific class or group of people (e.g., 'the peasants', 'the petty trader'), but instead accounts for 'broad social fields of thought and action' in which the actor in question is inscribed (Palomera and Vetta 2016, 415).

Where neoliberalism is commonly portrayed (and experienced) as a disorganisation of non-market regimes of value and the social relations that underlie them, new moral

registers emerge to contain and harmonise 'disorder' and these do not necessarily replicate the discursive templates of neoliberalism's own 'ideological charter' (Greenhouse 2012, 5–7). It has widely been observed that neoliberalism has a tendency to create a tense ambivalent coalition with traditional conservatism, especially of nationalistic or xenophobic kinds (e.g., Crouch, della Porta, and Streeck 2016). Both Russia and China, for instance, provide good examples of how conservative approaches to ancient traditions have recently been coupled with economic-social realities brought about by neoliberal globalisation. In China, (neo-)Confucianism has been used to justify the introduction of a capitalist economy and the ideological hegemony of wealth in what is formally a communist one-party state. The 'Confucian strategy' in general and 'Confucian merchants' in particular aim simultaneously at legitimising political authority and challenging Eurocentric discourses of development and enrichment (Zurndorfer 2017). In a similar vein, Russian 'traditional values' have been introduced into collective memory in the post-Soviet decades to address perceived shortages of new positive unifying national symbols. President Putin has complained that there is a 'deficit of spiritual values' and that these values have to be recovered from the thousands of years of Russian history.<sup>3</sup> Within this paradigm of 'national recovery' and renewal, the pre-revolutionary 'Russian merchant' or the merchant estate (*kupecheskoe soslovie*)<sup>4</sup> with its culture, religiosity and political orientation has emerged as yet another 'site of memory'; Russian merchants have been transformed into national heroes of sorts, becoming a model for present-day Russian entrepreneurs and helping to establish a Russian cultural capitalist antipode to Western neoliberal subjectivity.

While conservative (neo)traditionalism has come to define the discursive contours of the moral economy in Russia, there is a conspicuous absence of references to 'the Russian merchant' in ethnographies of post-Socialist economic development and trade. This is, of course, not that surprising given that there is no apparent continuity. There is neither any legal continuity of the merchant estate, nor any obvious 'organic' cultural or kinship links between pre-Soviet merchants and post-Soviet businessmen and traders.<sup>5</sup> Many prominent Russian merchant families, including those few whose legacy was preserved during the Soviet period, moved abroad, while others vanished in Soviet purges or became ordinary employees of the Soviet state.<sup>6</sup> With the exception of ethnic trading minorities and migrants (for instance, Roma, or traders from Central Asia and the Caucasus operating in the predominantly Slav regions of the USSR) who maintained traces of their commercial cultures or lifestyles at the margins of the socialist economy, new Russian traders had little in terms of historical business culture, values or commercial traditions to rely upon. For many post-Soviet traders, market places and the transnational shuttle trade have become the first 'school of entrepreneurship' (Diatlov 2015, 30).

To sum up, from a moral economic perspective, merchant values and ideology as they are represented historically and discussed today in public discourse (mass media, Russian NGOs, the Orthodox Church, state institutions) have to be acknowledged alongside the above-mentioned model of the neoliberals (e.g., in the business mass media and 'success manuals'), 'entrepreneurial governmentality' and legacies of informal Soviet networking. In line with the Russian state's increasing emphasis on economic nationalism and anti-Western hostility (due to falling oil prices and Western economic sanctions imposed after Russia's annexation of Crimea), political and religious authorities, as well as civil society, are participating in the on-going 'framing' (Mitchell 1990) of moral economy. Even though the neoliberal actors of 'globalisation from below' (as well as those of

'globalisation from above') do not uniformly subscribe to authoritarian traditionalism, its impact on many Russian entrepreneurs' economic practices and forms of self-identification/-presentation should not be overlooked or underestimated. My example of successful Russian operations that have taken off in Yiwu and given rise to a major wholesale business in Russia is also meant to illustrate how a moral economy 'travels' along the routes established by 'globalisation from below'.

In what follows I will first introduce Russian small-commodities traders in Yiwu, foregrounding forms of cooperation and the place of mistrust in the transnational traders' moral economy. Then I turn to the articulations of moral economy in interconnected spaces: a case study of 'Russian merchant innovation' in China – a Russian trading company organised as a micro-enclave – and its headquarters in Russia. Finally, I shall contextualise these transnational traders in the broader discursive value regime of 'the Russian merchant', showing how some Russian entrepreneurs inscribe themselves into a historically disrupted and recently created cultural genealogy of the merchant estate.

### Background: an ethnography of Russian 'economic behaviour' and trust in Yiwu

The city of Yiwu – the world's supermarket or 'one-stop shop' – offers the largest number of small and low-grade commodities of any place in China. It has been a popular destination for different types of Russian traders, from small shop owners and middlemen to big wholesalers,<sup>7</sup> for almost two decades. As Yiwu's indoor Futian market was rapidly expanding in the 1990s–2000s, it attracted shuttle traders who had previously visited Urumqi and Beijing's Russian markets. Along with these flows of Russians, Russophone Chinese and Central Asians from the former Soviet republics have also come to the city to work as agents, middlemen and interpreters. What has attracted traders to small and 'remote' Yiwu – a city still often described in Russian online reviews as a place 'away from civilization' (e.g., Bondarenko 2015) or a 'village of speedy self-development'<sup>8</sup> – is cheap prices, the availability of small wholesale, quick manufacturing schedules and the concentration of a vast range of goods in one market-place.

In 2002 Russia was the second largest importer of Yiwu goods after the UAE. It fell to fifth place in 2009 (Pliez 2012, 27–29). More recently, the number of Russian traders has fallen further still and this is attributed to the weak rouble and overall economic recession caused by lower oil prices. Yet, while at the time of my research visit in summer 2016, there were not many Russians roaming the market, their commercial significance could be seen in numerous cargo and transport companies serving Russian destinations, the Russian-language ads of Chinese manufacturers and exclusive 'Russian' commodities (e.g., Russian icons and souvenirs, Russian 'Father Christmas' and other toys that are often copied by Chinese manufacturers during the trade fairs in Moscow or Hong-Kong). Predictions voiced in the early 1990s that the 'sharks of capitalism' would squeeze out small traders from the lucrative trade with China (e.g., Ukhlin 1993) have not come true. Instead, the new hubs popular with agents of 'globalisation from below' have continued to produce new 'sharks' in their own right. And the possibility of a small-volume wholesale, including transport services to deal with small consignments, has kept on attracting new small traders.

Similar to other commercial destinations worldwide (cf. Yukseker 2004 on Turkey), Russian traders in Yiwu do not constitute a trading diaspora or extensive business networks of co-ethnics. Single traders or small groupings come to the city for several days to make a selection of goods and place orders at the Futian market. They visit showrooms of their old suppliers and roam the market in search of new ideas, new types of merchandise and better prices. When placing an order, the trader can only hope that his supplier will deliver the agreed upon quality and quantity, because, with the exception of old stock, at the time of purchase there are only samples available for inspection.

The dynamics of Russian trade and sociality in Yiwu do not appear to be different from other commercial hubs in China (see e.g., Humphrey 2018). At present, there is a general perception that China is relatively 'mafia-free' and safe for doing business: criminals targeting transnational traders are kept in check by the authorities and the same authorities may turn a blind eye to traders' violation of the visa regime (cf. Lan 2017 on Guangzhou). A Tadjik market trader in St. Petersburg told me fondly that when in China she could leave money in a hotel room and nobody would steal it: 'If a cleaner steals your money, the authorities will chop off her finger. So they do not steal from foreigners in China.' In Yiwu, a young Russophone Uzbek interpreter in his early 20s recalled that shortly after he came to China to study he set up a business operation to extract 'protection' money (a 'roof', *krysha*) disguised as 'cleaning fees' from Chinese street vendors and Arab café owners operating next to his college. Everybody paid him, but when his Chinese friends understood what he was doing they warned him that the Chinese authorities would simply execute him if they found out. These narratives of 'safe China' contrast sharply with Russians' views of Chinese businesses and traders in Russia and the border zones as being controlled by Chinese intelligence and/or mafia-style conglomerates. These views were commonplace in the 1990s (e.g., Lukin 1998); perhaps attempts by the local Chinese authorities to safeguard an agreeable business environment have contributed to the shift in traders' perceptions. In Yiwu, for instance, the authorities introduced a city-wide video surveillance system in 2003 and a local people's police and, in tandem with new security measures, have promoted the city as a 'second home area' where foreigners are treated as citizens and encouraged to enjoy a 'natural bond' with the locals as if they were all one big 'family' (Pieke 2012, 62–63).

Yet, the vision of 'safe China' does not imply that traders operate in a high trust environment. Theorisations of 'globalisation from below' often highlight 'human social bonds' (Matthews, Lins Ribeiro, and Alba Vega 2012, 11) or trust as a necessary idiom to carry on transactions where there are not many legal options available to enforce an agreement/contract (cf. Yukseker 2004, 54–56). Russian practitioners in China would, by contrast, emphasise cultural alienation and mistrust as a local disposition and a quality of commercial ethics. Writing about cross-border trade in the Chinese town of Manzhouli, Peshkov (2018) documents a pervasive suspicion on the part of Russians of their Chinese 'helpers' (*'pomogai'*), 'friends' and commercial partners. He identifies an 'insoluble contradiction' that suspicion produces – Russians attempt to resolve problems through their Chinese 'friends' but at the same time they are looking for 'real' Chinese prices that these friends might be hiding from them.

As if in elaboration of this theme, my Russian interlocutors in Yiwu postulated that the Chinese were not capable of being friends with foreigners (*laowai*, Chinese).<sup>9</sup> It would be a simplification to view this attitude as mere pragmatic caution (a 'survival strategy') under



conditions of market competition. For Russians, the normative idea of friendship means a selfless emotional relationship of trust and Chinese are not seen as sharing this cultural understanding. For the latter, friendship is said to be a façade that disguises calculations of benefits. If trust designates relationships in which people regularly place valued outcomes at risk of others' mistakes or failures (cf. Tilly 2005), in their 'friendships' with Chinese, Russians try to avoid taking such risks. Even Russians' expectations of Chinese pragmatism are often undermined by suppliers' preference for short-term calculations of gain (e.g., goods are not properly packed, are faulty or the wrong commodities are shipped) that makes them appear uninterested in long-term cooperation. Online reviews of Yiwu remind traders that every deal should be treated as the first deal and approached with due caution and checks (e.g., Bondarenko 2015). In this respect, Yiwu trade resembles e-commerce on platforms like Alibaba that has been open to Russia since 2015 – there is a (perceived) high risk of being cheated by Chinese suppliers one way or the other; it is the regular physical presence of traders and their local agents administering control of shipments that is meant to make Yiwu trade less risky than buying similar commodities on Alibaba.

In this commercial environment, traders' 'hope' for successful dealings is thus often vested in their local agents and Russian interpreters. Most traders do not speak Chinese and use interpreters who either work for a cargo/transport company or function as independent agents providing quality control of the goods at the factories and organising deliveries to Russia. The independent interpreters-agents work on commission from the total value of purchased commodities paid by their Russian clients. Often these individuals operate in several commercial hubs in China and have an established circle of more or less regular Russian customers that they have cultivated for years. Russians' socialisation with the local Chinese is minimal and the value of trust in one's interpreter-agent is reflected in the higher rates of 'commission' that they receive.<sup>10</sup>

Scholars relate mistrust of Chinese to Russians' ambiguous valuation of China. There is a willingness to see Chinese as allies, friendly neighbours and commercial partners but there are also concerns about China's economic might and geographic expansion. This disposition, they argue, is nurtured by the Russian state's preoccupation with security rather than economic development (Shlapentokh 2007; Peshkov 2018). Indeed, my Chinese interlocutors in Yiwu have hinted at traders' 'wounded patriotism': Russians are fascinated by Chinese economic growth, but it also hurts their national pride that they have been overtaken by what was, until recently, 'a less developed' and poorer nation. The legacy of the latter image may also explain why, in contrast to other transnational traders (e.g. Afghanis, Arabs) Russians in Yiwu are reluctant to establish intimate or matrimonial relations with the host population.<sup>11</sup> (Several popular night clubs are staffed with Russian and Ukrainian dancers who double as potential dates for local migrants from the former Soviet space.) This image may also explain traders' attempts at ignoring 'the end of cheap China': pushing prices below what seems reasonable to local suppliers is justified by the assumption that there are Chinese who are still prepared to work 'for a bowl of soup'.<sup>12</sup>

### *The traps of innovation and potentialities of success*

If the correlation of price and quality is a major headache for small traders (for they typically receive the quality they have paid, not 'hoped', for), another economic dilemma, which is not relevant only for Russian traders, is related to 'exclusivity' and the 'copying'

of cheap commodities by competitors. The fear of 'theft' and the secretive search for 'exclusive' goods, which can be traced back to the early years of the shuttle trade (see Ukhlin 1993), structure commercial and personal relations between traders, their Chinese suppliers and interpreters. An owner of a small supermarket chain, and a first-time visitor to Yiwu I met in 2016 identified the problem immediately:

Now I got this idea ... I can copy Gdzhel patterns and print them on the bedding sets – they will sell like hot buns at my supermarket. But as soon as I place an order at the Futian, everybody will know and copy my idea. Gdzhel bedding will be everywhere.

Another of my interlocutors who was based in Yiwu and regularly sent goods back home with his wife shared with me his solution to the problem:

I designed myself this beautiful Christmas tree, I knew it would sell well. I came to my old supplier and told him that he produces this tree for me, I pay him, and so that we are clear – I give him my design as a gift. There is one condition – he cannot sell a single copy of this tree to anybody from my country. If he does and I find out, I will kill him. I was clear about that.

Chinese interpreters-agents are under pressure to manifest high moral grounds and perform 'loyalty' to their clients, which, among other things, implies refusing Russian customers dealing in similar commodities if they come from the same city (even a megapolis like Moscow), and reporting subversive behaviour of traders' employees or associates. Traders-compatriots are particularly suspect as potential 'thieves' of one's brilliant idea of a new commodity, and those buying similar types of goods avoid each other socially in the city. This excessive concern with the 'uniqueness' of cheap commodities is something that differentiates Russian traders from some other groups or ethnic networks who also operate in Russia.

A striving towards 'exclusive innovation' seems to impact both on Russians' individual commercial growth and their collective share of the Russian market. As one Russian old-timer in Yiwu put it:

Russians ... do not understand how this trade works. They can only supply a supermarket or keep a stall (*lavka*, Russian), but there are no really big wholesalers, like our Pashtuns ... They (Pashtuns) manage to keep prices in Moscow lower than in Yiwu!

Whereas Russian traders make full use of the flexibility provided by transport companies that take consignments of any (small) size, Afghanis load full containers with identical goods belonging to different traders and send these container-'caravans' to Russia. Taking advantage of economies of scale and cheaper transport costs, rather than betting on the 'exclusivity' of cheap goods that are difficult to ensure, the trading diasporas secure their success in Russia.

However, innovative schemes of business organisation have also emerged in response to this market competition and a culture of secrecy; Russian traders' mistrust of co-ethnics, which precludes effective cooperation and networks, has sometimes encouraged new economic-social forms, exhibiting ideological traces attributed to the merchant estate. A Russian wholesale company based in Yiwu that I call 'the Corporation', which has grown out of the efforts of a small trader, illustrates how mistrust is harnessed to achieve economic success and how together with the patriotic-traditionalist discourse it forges a model of Russian moral economy.

## The Russian islands in Yiwu

The community of Russian migrants in Yiwu is small and spatially dispersed.<sup>13</sup> One site of commercial and social gravitation is a complex of several streets across the road from the Futian market that host transport companies, Russian, Georgian, Azeri and Central Asian restaurants, clubs and a hotel, catering for Russophone visitors. A Russian migrant I call Nikolai, who has spent more than a decade in Yiwu, referred to this area as 'the Russian island' (*Russkii ostrov*). It was also Nikolai who told me about a different 'Russian island' located on the outskirts of Yiwu and created by a shuttle trader – the Corporation.

The company's 'origin-story' dates back to the early 2000s when a trader from an industrial city in the Urals, who had tried his luck with different small ventures in Russia (e.g., a shoe repair workshop), used his starter capital of 2000 US \$ to import Chinese-made toys and souvenirs from Yiwu. By 2016, having survived the financial crisis of the late 2000s and the fall of the rouble in 2014, the company claimed to have suppliers from 50 countries, more than 5000 employees and was selling the larger part of its product range under its own brand name.<sup>14</sup> Around 100 Russian employees, from sales managers and lawyers to workers, are based in Yiwu and today, the Corporation is the biggest Russian company in the city, formally operating under the name of its Chinese General Partner (*general'nyi partner*) that is headed by the Russian owner's old Chinese friend (*drug*, Russian). The Chinese friend is in charge of all transport operations and also represents the Corporation's merchandise at the Futian market.

The growth of the company went hand in hand with its transformation into a kind of enclave with specific social, psychological and labour technologies, fenced off from local society. The employees are mainly hired in Russia, by the Russian head office, and moved to China on temporary contracts, and they are not allowed to talk to other Russians in Yiwu. In the Futian market, Russians are not allowed into the company's showroom (Russophone traders have to show their passports to prove that they come from elsewhere); all wholesale deliveries to Russia are dealt with by the head office in Russia.

Different arrangements are in place to fence off risks posed by business competitors and 'thieves' of innovative designs, as well as to produce a particular vision of moral economy. Since a couple of years ago, the company's offices, a large showroom, the dormitories of Russian employees, a canteen serving Russian food for free, sports facilities, and warehouses, have all been gathered 'under one roof' and kept under total surveillance. To access the territory, employees use their fingerprints and all guests have to be cleared by management. Foreigners-dates are not welcome: 'We should not have outsiders in our home, how do you know that he is not a terrorist?' Unauthorised contacts between ordinary employees and outsiders may lead to punishment, including bullying and corporal chastisement. Chinese employees of the company have a separate dormitory outside the 'Russian compound'. A shuttle bus moves some workers to and from the Futian market, whereas those who do not work on the market spend their days in the compound. Working hours are not fixed: after a quick supper in the canteen (a huge screen with music videos does not encourage a slow meal) around 6pm, people go back to the office to work 'as long as they want.' Sunday is the day off; some employees go out to town for a meal or to visit a beauty salon, but many old-timers opt for a sleep-in.

The work rhythm, surveillance and spatial segregation may appear oppressive to an outsider, but listening to the insiders it became clear that many accepted the arrangement

whereby the economic, the social and the intimate or sexual were fused within one place and one institution. One young unmarried female sales manager imagined the company's showroom at the Futian as her small palace (*dvorets*) where she could invest her 'energy and soul' (*energiiu i dushu*) into her clients. Another woman talked about how the Corporation allows her to have a good quality life:

In Russia I would spend all my money on rent, food, transport ... It is an illusion that in Russia you can work until 7 pm and be free. You'd spend so much time in traffic, shopping, cooking, cleaning. Here there are people who do this work and I use my time to make money for the company ... I would not have more leisure time elsewhere ... I work and then I come to my room to wash and sleep ... I do not differentiate between work and nonwork ... we work hard and relax well.

Making money for the company was mentioned as a supreme value, leading some employees to develop a close affinity with their customers:

I treat my clients' business as mine. I have helped one to choose commodities, now his business is 80% our merchandise. ... I am concerned (*perezhivaiu*) about my clients, they share their lives with me, their ambitions, and I get to know their children, wives and their aspirations.

My interlocutors mentioned that there are employees who long for 'freedom' (*volia*) or have 'lost the plot' and been sent back to Russia; the pressures of collective living and hard work are acknowledged by the company: those who have endured more than three years in Yiwu are rewarded by a star in the compound's 'walk of fame'. Yet, they saw the secluded 'Russian island' of work-rest-sex provided by the Corporation as safe and self-sufficient. Various leisure activities are organised by the dedicated employees and the company encourages sexual romantic relations only within its walls. The availability of mating partners is regulated by the management. 'In our company, ... the boys and girls are friends. Hopefully I will meet my husband here as well,' the sales manager told me. One's place in the company's hierarchy determines the acceptable degree of personal and sexual freedom in interactions with outsiders. 'Unsanctioned' attempts to mess up the top-down allocations of 'partners', just as undesirable contacts with Russophone outsiders, can be punished by co-workers. In addition to video surveillance, mutual horizontal surveillance and denunciation, not unlike in the Soviet collective (e.g. Kharkhordin 1999), are firmly in place.

In this way, besides being a work collective, the Corporation in Yiwu functions as a hierarchically-organised, paternalistic 'home' (*dom*), representing a moral economy that brings to mind a Russian-style Phalanstery. To recall, the Phalanstery was conceived by the nineteenth century French radical philosopher, Charles Fourier, as a utopian community that would host a group of people (500–1000) working together as one extended family, sustaining an autonomous economy and integrating social, economic and private life in an architectural complex segregated from wider society. When the Phalanstery idea was discussed in nineteenth century Russia, the 'impossible equality' proposed by Fourier was rejected. Instead, harmony was to be safeguarded by a social structure based on 'inequality of condition and class as well as a hierarchy of capabilities and merit'. For its critics, the Russian-style Phalanstery was as autocratic as the Russian monarchy (Kaplan 1958, 169–171). In the Corporation, the higher authority is vested into the trader-founder. When I asked my hosts whether they knew what model of business organisation he relied upon, they replied that this was 'a model of a strong man who creates something out

of nothing, who makes everyone very proud' and whom they respected 'endlessly' (*beskonechno*). They went on to describe the founder as a genius, who had an individual approach to each and every one of his employees and who created conditions for each person 'to stay in Yiwu as long as possible to make money for the company'.

The imaginary of a secure 'home' fostered by the Corporation locates it off-the national grid.<sup>15</sup> While for some employees this autonomy is mainly about segregation from surrounding China, for others, being 'off the national grid' also implies distancing from Russia as a 'homeland'. As one woman put it:

Everything about this place [Yiwu] irritates me, the food, the way of life, ... but I no longer say that I go home when I go to Russia. I say that I go to Russia to see my mother. After two years in Yiwu, I do not *live* in China ... We are a Russian island inside greater China. I like this company – this is my home.

What also makes the Corporation-cum-home similar to the historical Russian take on the Phalanstery is its embeddedness in a Russian political language that is at present dominated by state patriotism and Orthodox identity.

Not only is a substantial part of the Corporation's China-made merchandise Russian patriotic commodities (from car stickers with anti-Western motifs to Putin t-shirts) and Orthodox paraphernalia. Both inside and outside, the compound is decorated with symbols of national-political belonging. There is a huge drawing of the Kremlin on one wall of the office building, and a 'patriotic corner' with a Russian flag and a portrait of Putin in the drawing room. Patriotic posters, featuring the Russian bear, Stalin and the like, hang on the walls in common areas. The display of photographs includes a picture of the founder with the singer Grigori Leps, who was invited to perform at a corporate event. And Leps is not just any Russian pop star – he is a pro-regime artist who participated in Putin's election campaign in 2012, and has been blacklisted by the US for moving 'black cash' abroad and having connections to mafia-circles. All in all, the Yiwu compound boasts a type of patriotism that is based on an alliance with and proximity to political power in Russia.

Although at the first sight, these patriotic displays may appear to be routine expressions of 'national belonging' in a diaspora, it does not take long to find out that the Yiwu compound and the Corporation's head office in Russia belong to a continuous ideological space established by the founder, who moves between China and Russia, and maintained by his Russian employees, some of whom also move between the offices in Yiwu and Russia. This ideological space, in turn, provides a glimpse into the ways in which moral economy logics are applied in Russia and linked to reformulations of neoliberal subjectivity in Russia more generally.

### *Patriotism and a 'Little North Korea'*

Corporate practices at the company's Russian headquarters illuminate values that have been persistently promoted in Putin's Russia. Some of the values are documented in the company's online promotional materials, such as new rituals of the Great Patriotic War's celebrations, including a collective Victory waltz, everyday singing of the Russian Anthem, a competition for 'the most patriotically decorated' workplace, consecration of the workplaces by the region's highest Orthodox authorities followed by a speech about the 'joy' (*radost'*) to be brought to one's workplace, and so on. In October 2016,

the founder formulated his ethics and vision in a rare public appearance in connection with his winning the title of 'the Person of the Year' (*Chelovek Goda*), to which he was nominated by the editorial board of the on-line business portal 'Business Quarterly' (*Delovoi Kvartal*) in his home city.

... the person of the year has to talk about optimistic things ... Today we are a very rich company, and I am also a very rich man ... How could I achieve this? – I can simply see what others cannot see. This is the first point. Second, I have built my business on very different premises ... The basis is ... what is needed most, first it is morality (*nравstvennost'*) and second, patriotism. The third is love of what you are doing. Probably, this love should be number one. I even invented a slogan: 'The one who loves his business/occupation (*delo*) transforms it into art.' ...

If a person loves his business, maybe he is not going to be rich, but he will have a decent life. A reason for non-success (*neuspekh*) is not loving your occupation, but loving the money ...

Yes ... I have decorated the new office in the style of the Hermitage (museum).<sup>16</sup> The ceilings are decorated in gold, thousands of meters of ceilings. My comrade, a Duma deputy, came to visit. He rolled his eyes like this ... But I am not ashamed because I am doing it for the people. The office is 15,000 square metres, there are around 2000 people there and I will add another 15,000 metres. This is going to be the biggest office in the whole world.

The entrepreneur did not make the impression of being a skilful public speaker, but his short speech was very well received by the audience – representatives of the local business community – who cheered and applauded throughout his address. The speech and the Corporation's promotional materials encapsulate parameters of a particular type of new Russian entrepreneurs, as I will discuss below.

The scope of patriotic activities of the Corporation has not passed unnoticed outside business circles. A Russian regional online news-site in their regular rubric 'Selected rumours about the best people of Russia. Don't be afraid of rumours, the truth is scarier', published an article about the Corporation entitled 'The patriotic boom swept the Ural businessmen up.'<sup>17</sup> Public discussions of the company's ethics are, however, largely reserved to online 'flame-wars' between its former and current employees and job seekers. Negative evaluations emerge in blogs and online reviews by disgruntled former employees who, besides dissatisfaction with long working hours (ironically called 'Chinese hours'), grey salaries, and a system of 'collective' fines,<sup>18</sup> mention that the founder considers non-Orthodox believers to be immoral persons, and that people are asked to publicly manifest support for power (on one occasion, employees were told to use the company's stickers 'I am for Putin' on their private cars)<sup>19</sup>; the failure to participate in the patriotic rituals is punished by fines. One former employee compared the company to 'a little North Korea.'<sup>20</sup>

Defenders of the Corporation and the company's trolls respond by attacking these 'opportunists':

... patriotism and love for the Motherland is one of the specificities of the company, and it is particularly important because the collective is young. In contrast to many competitors-self-seekers */rvachi/* who only see golden dollars with their greedy eyes, and who think only about profits, ... who have neither soul nor the pride of the real patriots ... /the Corporation/ makes the world around us better!!!<sup>21</sup>

This response to the Corporation's critics summarises current rhetoric in Russia differentiating 'bad' and 'good' economic behaviour in explicitly patriotic terms that manifest support for the current power holders. It exemplifies attempts aimed at the popularisation of a politically loyal moral economy. It also highlights an ideological opposition of the '(neo)liberal' entrepreneurs (*liberaly*) as potentially subversive subjects<sup>22</sup> and the (neo)traditionalist traders perpetuating the ethical world of 'the Russian merchant' made relevant to Russia's twenty-first century capitalism.

### A post-Soviet moral economy and value hierarchy: revival of the merchant estate

The secretive 'Russian-style Phalanstery' that the Corporation's founder created in Yiwu to protect his designs and secure maximum labour efficiency may have been his own innovation, but in his ethical orientation he seems to fashion himself more on a culturally-complex and ideologically-secure model than a 'new neoliberal' of the sort discussed by Yurchak (2003). In public discourse, 'the Russian merchant' has been offered to Russian entrepreneurs as an exemplar for collective identification who does not have 'oppositional qualities', even though this exemplar, like most post-Soviet sites of memory, is a subject of moral controversy.

The 'marginalised "losers"' of the Russian Revolution' (West 1998a, 3) as the historian West called them, the Russian merchant estate were mainly known to the generations of Soviet citizens from the works of the nineteenth century Russian classics who reproduced their negative image as a 'dark imperium' and 'vulgarian tyrants' (*temnoe tsarstvo* and *samodury*).<sup>23</sup> Contemporary historical research has variously engaged with these stereotypes, pointing out that the merchant estate was a politically weak and unstable social category prone to dubious professional ethics (e.g., West 1998a, 6–12; West 1998b) and undervalued by the Imperial state that favoured foreign entrepreneurs as technologically superior. At the same time, the merchants, both Orthodox and Old Believers, were known as adherents of 'the old regime', as traditionalists devoted to the ideal of tsarist autocracy.<sup>24</sup> An alliance with the Slavophiles, whom they supported financially, had nourished the estate's anti-Western sentiments and general hostility towards liberal ideas. Among the Moscow merchants, for instance, the verb '*liberal'ni-chat*' – 'playing a liberal' – was used to ridicule an opponent. Given their fervent patriotism (*kvass* patriotism) some historians argued that even those few wealthy and well-travelled merchants who declared themselves Anglophiles were only superficially cosmopolitan (e.g., Owen 1981).<sup>25</sup> By the time of the socialist revolution in 1917, the merchant estate was ideologically fragmented, and neither the political activism of its members, nor their legendary philanthropy (their sponsorship of arts, education) could help them to establish a publicly-recognised 'heroic self' (e.g., Clowes 1998) due to their association with exploitation at the factory floor and rampant inequalities (West 1998a, 11).

However unequivocal the images of the Russian merchant are in historical accounts, the received myths of 'stingy cheaters' and 'religious philanthropists' (e.g., Bogachev 2012) have been re-evaluated as a moral economy that could appeal to Russian sensibilities in the Putin era. As one Russian scholar argued: 'Against the background of the current problems of the [Russian] market economy, the [negative] image of the merchant most



probably only irritates the ordinary Russian' (Jakovleva 2008, 177). A different 'national merchant' (*natsional'noe kupechestvo*) – the 'unjustly forgotten' (Krasko 2010, 7) – have now appeared in popular representations and cultural memory: 'the origin of Russian entrepreneurship' (*istoki rossiiskogo predprinimatel'stva*) (Bogomolova 2012), 'a pillar of the Russian state', 'builders of Russia' (*stroiteli Rossii*), agents of industrialisation, the key contributors to the economic flourishing of the Russian cities and so on. Newly opened museums, exhibitions, monuments, countless publications, history programmes broadcast on national and regional TV<sup>26</sup> and digitally mediated re-productions have corrected Soviet 'prejudices' and commemorated the merchant estate.<sup>27</sup>

The post-Soviet discourse on the merchant estate is vast in breadth and diversity, and its discussion lies outside the scope of this article. Suffice it to mention two interrelated trends that stand out in this body of cultural production. One is a call to recognise that 'Western and Russian commercial worlds were not simply different planets, but rather different galaxies' (Jakovleva 2007, 187). A clear-cut contrast is postulated between Western attitudes to wealth as an individual achievement that benefited only its proprietor, and the Russian merchant – a bearer of the Russian spirit – who saw his wealth as a source of public well-being (*na obshchestvennoe blago*),<sup>28</sup> multiplying his capital for the glory of Russia'.<sup>29</sup> The other trend involves critical reflection on post-Soviet capitalism via the prism of the 'spirit of the merchant' (*dukh kupechestva*). From this perspective, post-Soviet 'oligarchic' Russian capitalism points to a rupture with tradition, for it does not give much chance to many small traders and entrepreneurial *muzhiks* ('real men') to come to the top. The wild capitalism of the 1990s has been replaced by state 'governed' capitalism under Putin, and with it comes a new rhetoric that postulates a 'psychological change': a new understanding that the wealth of nation is not gas or oil, but the free and socially responsible entrepreneur (*sotsial'no otvestvennye predprinimateli*) (fn. 28, *Russkii kupets*, 2012). Various online resources and teaching aids foreground the source of this social responsibility in merchants' collectivist values, harking back to the communes of peasants (*obshchina*) and Old Believers.<sup>30</sup>

The re-evaluation of the Russian merchant as a model for a Russian capitalist moral economy acknowledges the central role of the Orthodox Church and religiosity. The traditional national merchant was an Orthodox patriot. Since the early 1990s there are professional organisations of businessmen/entrepreneurs with headquarters in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other big Russian cities that work either under the aegis of the Church, such as Clubs and Unions of Orthodox Entrepreneurs (*pravoslavnye predprinimateli*), or that cooperate with Orthodox Entrepreneurs, like The Society of Merchants and Industrialists (*Obshchestvo kuptsov i promyshlennikov*) founded in Moscow. These organisations have become mainstream and often have members of the ruling party, 'United Russia', in key positions. Today they promote an alternative Ethical Concept of Entrepreneurship and alternative MBAs based on 'the revival of traditional and development of new values', and 'the best practice of pre-Revolutionary Russian entrepreneurs'.<sup>31</sup> 'For the glory of the Fatherland' (*Vo slavu Otechestva*) is a common slogan; 'respect power' (*uvazhai vlast'*) is a common message. Far from being a metropolitan development, similar initiatives are commonplace at the grassroots in the Russian hinterland. For instance, in 2000 a group of small traders in the town of Gagarin in the Smolensk region established their own 'Union of Entrepreneurs' and advertised themselves as 'successors of the good traditions of the merchant estate'.<sup>32</sup>

This tendency towards professional-political organisation of a non-oppositional character among entrepreneurs and traders replicates the stereotype of the merchant estate as a conservative supporter of the government. As Kordonskii (2008) pointed out, in general terms, estate identifications in post-Soviet Russia are important in corporate competition for state resources, allocations and rents that is often mistaken as simple 'corruption'. At present, from a legal point of view, in contrast to say (the titular estates of) the police or the army, Russian entrepreneurs and traders are best seen as a 'non-titular' estate that do not directly 'serve' the state (*sluzhat*). Kordonskii suggests that the formal establishment of the merchant estate is on the way – the introduction of the Day of Entrepreneur (*Den' Predprinimatelia*) by the state is a step in this direction (Kordonskii 2008, 17). A simple point I want to make here is that all these institutional arrangements of Russian civil society and the state, and discourses that re-evaluate, rehabilitate and propagate 'the Russian merchant' have also formulated values that shape a Russian capitalist moral economy; 'the merchant' has become both a reflection and an expression of what it also means to be a Russian-style neoliberal as well as an embodiment of a particular political culture that competes with other ideological currents present in Russian society. The creativity of the founder of the Corporation in Yiwu and the socio-economic form this Corporation has taken are in part a product of the forces of global market competition and Yiwu's culture of (business) mistrust, but they have also been shaped by recently popularised version of a merchant moral economy, which ties opportunities for commercial expansion to the Russian state.

## Conclusion

In this article I hope to have shown that from the moral economy perspective, the model of a universal neoliberal trader with some Russian characteristics is not sufficient to grasp the multiple sources of business creativity and the range of discursive practices available to the Russian entrepreneurial class for the purpose of self-identification. In present-day Russia, a neoliberal trader can fashion himself with the help of the revived models from former eras, like the patriotic, traditionalist, Orthodox merchant who lends his political and economic support to autocratic power. Political and public attempts at recovering the old Russian merchant as a positive social category underscore a worldwide political strategy to align neoliberalism and traditional conservatism, however problematic such an alliance can be (Crouch, della Porta, and Streeck 2016, 499). In Russia, the moral economy of the merchant estate is called upon to mend historical ruptures between different moral frameworks of state socialism and capitalism as well as to complete transition from the West-oriented dispositions of the wild-1990s with its 'bandits' (*banditskii*) and 'oligarchic' capitalism to state 'governed' capitalism of the Putin's rule.

The case of the Corporation shows that global nodes of commerce like Yiwu and the routes of 'globalisation from below' do not simply forge global neoliberal subjects out of former Soviets. They provide new opportunities and contexts for 'the Russian merchant' to re-emerge in a novel format (albeit sometimes exhibiting the recognisable 'vulgarian tyranny' (*samodurstvo*) of their pre-Soviet predecessors). The Corporation's isolated Russian compound in Yiwu has emerged in a climate of suspicion and informal opportunistic economic behaviour in the market-place that small shuttle traders know only too well. However, we can also speculate that it has taken this particular, idiosyncratic form,

and become a nested moral economy I called 'Russian-style Phalanstery', because the present-day 'Russian merchant' operates in a paranoid political environment where ideological language breeds uncertainty about actors' actual commitments. Omnipresent control and monitoring of social and intimate life provided by the Russian Phalanstery model in Yiwu not only enhance labour productivity, but also address this uncertainty and paranoia. The Russian old-timer in Yiwu, Nikolai, who was the first to tell me about the trader-founder of the Corporation, mentioned in passing that the founder refused to give him a job in the company: 'He said that he does not understand my way of thinking'. I wondered whether Nikolai understood the founder's way of thinking and what all this secrecy, segregation, mating, patriotic ritualisation and surveillance were about. He was not sure he did but granted that all that was at the core of the matter: 'It simply works! He is a millionaire.'

## Notes

1. The nature of these experiences (positive or negative) has itself become a highly politicised and contested topic carried on in discussions on social media and online forums (e.g. <https://www.facebook.com/snarkf?lst=742145637%3A100001819035580%3A1492755374>). It often boils down to a more general question of how to evaluate the legacy of the 1990s (the first post-Soviet decade, the decade of 'freedom'/'chaos'). Under the current authoritarian style of rule, the 1990s are represented by the regime's supporters as a kind of dystopia (Skvirskaja *forthcoming*).
2. Hence, the very concept of postsocialism retains its import long after the end of state socialism in Russia (cf. Humphrey 2002b). There is, however, also a view that 'postsocialism' should only be concomitant with the so-called period of transition (*perekhodnyi period*) from socialism to capitalism and therefore, it is no longer a viable description of contemporary Russia (e.g. Diatlov 2015).
3. In his address to the Federal Council in 2012 Putin famously used an archaism *skrepy* (an equivalent of 'linchpin' in this context) to refer to Russian spiritual values that supposedly hold (or should) hold Russians/Russian nation together.
4. Citizens of the Russian Empire were identified by estates (*soslovnia*, e.g. noble, clergy, merchant, peasant) which were ascriptive and often hereditary categories defining the rights and obligations of these groups to the state. As a legal-civic category the merchant estate ceased to exist after the Russian socialist revolution in October 1917 (e.g. Fitzpatrick 1993). For an overview of the Russian merchant estate see e.g. West (1998a), and for a more general overview of the Western and Russian scholarship on Russia's merchants, see e.g. Monahan (2016).
5. Statistics-based data on the background of Russian entrepreneurs (defined as owners of a business with a minimum of five employees) in the early 2000s indicates that there were hardly any entrepreneurs among the grandparents of those surveyed. More than 40% had a parent or parents' siblings involved in running a business (Djankov et al. 2005, 592).
6. See e.g. Krasko (2010) for an overview of St. Petersburg's merchants' family histories.
7. For a description of the different Russian categories of traders participating in cross-border trade, see e.g. Humphrey (2002a). The same categories in varying proportions are also present in Yiwu.
8. This is a Russian pun on the Chinese abbreviation for Yiwu – CCC (China Commodity City). In Russian, 'CCC' is rendered as 'Selo Stremitel'nogo Samorazvitiia' (i.e. a 'village of speedy self-development') (pingguo 2009).
9. Business consultants second this view when they argue (e.g. Rein 2012) that it is almost impossible for foreigners to become a part of 'true' *guanxi* (connections, networks) unless

they have lived in the country for a very long time and/or set up families with the locals, gained school friends and so on.

10. This strategy is reminiscent of 'individualist' Genoese merchants (Greif 1994 in Tilly 2005, 9) who paid the agent a high commission, 'an efficiency wage', to make the gain from cheating a single time less interesting than the expected gain in the long term. Similarly, Russian traders give higher rates to their Chinese agents in a bid to prevent them from taking commissions from manufactures or increase suppliers' prices during contract negotiations.
11. In Yiwu, I was told that Russians tend to avoid marriage and liaisons with the Chinese as a sign of their cultural superiority. This attitude towards marriages with the Chinese is documented elsewhere in China (e.g. Kireev 2016, 80).
12. This idiom was widely used by my informants-traders in the mid 2000s to explain the cheapness of Chinese commodities.
13. Since the 2000s, the majority of long-term migrants from Russia have settled in major urban centres in the most developed coastal part of China (Kireev 2016, 78). In Zhejiang province, middle class Russians are concentrated in the province's capital, Hangzhou, working mainly in high-tech and electronic commerce (e.g. Alibaba).
14. <http://malina.am/enciclopedia/simaland>. Accessed 21 February 2017.
15. For a discussion of the 'off-the-grid' enclaves, see Ferguson (2005). While the Corporation in Yiwu is integrated into the Chinese economy via its Chinese General Partner and hence, does not resemble secured enclaves engaged in resource extraction in Africa described by Ferguson, it is imagined as if 'off-the-grid' by its Russian employees.
16. That is in the style of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, the main residence of the Russian tsars.
17. <https://ura.news/articles/1036264164>. 27 February 2015.
18. Collective fines work by distributing the penalty for one employee's mistake among all employees of the department/unit where she works.
19. <https://orabote.top/feedback/show/id/459945>, <https://orabote.top/feedback/show/id/455477>
20. <https://orabote.top/feedback/show/id/372114>
21. <https://orabote.top/feedback/show/id/411780>
22. See e.g. Shlosberg (2016). <https://www.obozrevatel.com/politics/13942-lev-shlosberg-kazhdoe-povyishenie-tsenyi-na-neft-uvelichivaet-shansyi-na-vozbnoenie-voynyi-na-donbasse.htm>
23. These descriptions of the merchant estate were introduced by one of the most influential Russian playwrights, Alexander Ostrovskii (1823–1886), who is credited with creating a Russian national repertoire. Organised as a 'non-tax' estate along with the nobility, the merchants (*kupechestvo*, *kupecheskoe soslovie*), whose social origins lay in the peasantry, serfs and sectarian communities of Old Believers, did not enjoy the security of a hereditary status. The estate was stratified into three guilds distinguished by wealth, which also defined the range and scope of members' economic activities; membership in the estate had to be renewed annually to secure commercial privileges (West 1998a).
24. This devotion seems to be common both among metropolitan and geographically remote merchants. For instance, the memoirs of Siberian merchants in the late nineteenth century testify that while critical attitudes towards central power were commonly voiced, the monarch/tsar's authority was never mentioned or discussed (see e.g. Matkhanova 2016).
25. *Kvass* is a traditional Russian beverage made from rye bread. The ironic term '*kvass patriotism*' (*kvassnoi patriotism*) emerged in the nineteenth century to describe an uncritical form of patriotism incapable of negative evaluation of anything related to one's patria. From an anthropological perspective, however, cosmopolitanism and patriotism should not be seen as per se incompatible (cf. Appiah 1998 on patriotic cosmopolitanism). Also, the economic nationalism of Russian merchants and industrialists during and after the World War I was not always a conservative force, but, at times, a radical anti-imperial disposition in favour of liberal nationalist ideas of citizenship (Lohr 2003, 478–480).
26. Television series: 'The hour of truth. Russian merchants. Traditions and mores.' (*Chas istiny. Russkoe kupechestvo. Obychai i nrayi*). <http://youtubesmotret.ru/watch/chas-istiny---russkoe->

- kupechestvo---obichai-i-nravi---peredacha-tretya/rRl4Q3HSWVE, Chanell 365, Russian history channel (*Russkii istoricheskii kanal*) (2008).
27. See e.g. [http://www.ulzapovednik.ru/publikatsii/publikatsii/na-zashchite-kupechestva\\_2/](http://www.ulzapovednik.ru/publikatsii/publikatsii/na-zashchite-kupechestva_2/); Jakovleva (2017).
  28. This statement was aired on the national TV channel *Rossia*, in the popular programme *Kultura* (Culture) dedicated to 'the Russian merchant' in 2012. The invited experts were professional historians from The Institute of Russian History under the Russian Academy of Science (RAN).
  29. [www.hnh.ru/handycraft/2011-02-05](http://www.hnh.ru/handycraft/2011-02-05)
  30. <http://gifakt.ru/archives/index/russkie-sovestyu-ne-torgovali-tradicii-russkogo-kupechestva/>
  31. [http://opora-sozidanie.ru/?page\\_id=2see](http://opora-sozidanie.ru/?page_id=2see), Proceedings of the conference 'Traditional values in entrepreneurship' (2016). E.g. the pan-Russian organisation of small and medium size entrepreneurs 'Opora Rossii' ('Pillar of Russia', established in 2002, Moscow) set up a new project 'Opora-Sozidanie' ('Pillar – Creation') to deal with these issues.
  32. [www.gzhatsk.ru/gzhatskoe\\_kupechestvo/predprinimateli\\_gagarina\\_preemniki\\_dobryh\\_tradicii\\_kupechestva.html](http://www.gzhatsk.ru/gzhatskoe_kupechestvo/predprinimateli_gagarina_preemniki_dobryh_tradicii_kupechestva.html)

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## Aleppo in Asia: Mercantile networks between Syria, China and post-Soviet Eurasia since 1970

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# Aleppo in Asia: Mercantile networks between Syria, China and post-Soviet Eurasia since 1970

Paul Anderson

## ABSTRACT

Indian Ocean and Mediterranean studies have highlighted the limitations imposed on our understanding of the dynamics of West Asia by the paradigm of area studies and the category of the 'Middle East'. But less attention has been paid to how expansive perspectives that do not invoke an explicitly maritime geography might enrich our understanding of the region's formative connections. This article seeks to locate the modern city of Aleppo in a trans-regional Asian geography by tracing the shifting history of mercantile networks that connected Aleppo to other parts of Eurasia – notably, parts of the formerly Soviet world and the city of Yiwu in Southeast China. It highlights the importance of trans-regional flows of Soviet patronage, and then Chinese state subsidies and credit, in embedding Aleppo into these expansive circuits. It also argues that these flows have fostered the emergence of a hitherto-unstudied business class in Syria.



## KEYWORDS

Trade; migration; inter-Asia; transregionalism; Aleppo; Syria

## Introduction

This article seeks to locate the city of Aleppo in a trans-regional Asian geography and geopolitics. Empirically, it focuses on some of the trans-regional mercantile connections that tied Aleppo to other parts of Eurasia, and traces their historical development from the 1970s until the present. It reviews the history of Soviet patronage of Syria, and of post-Soviet central Asia, during the era of Hafez al-Asad (1971–2000), highlighting the ongoing significance of trading relations between Aleppo and the formerly Soviet world. It also documents some of the more recent connections fashioned by Aleppine merchants with China's export manufacturing sector, through the activities of importers who visit and in some cases are stationed in the commercial hub of Yiwu in Zhejiang province.

I consider these connections in relation to scholarship that has sought to reimagine the conceptual geography of the Middle East. An emerging body of work has argued that fixed geographical categories such as 'the Middle East' often obscure the formative interactions that cut across their boundaries. This has drawn our attention to existence of alternative, global and connected histories, highlighting the importance of diasporic religious, intellectual and commercial networks in shaping the region's dynamics (Ghazal 2014; Green 2014; Willis 2009). Much of this scholarship has privileged maritime spaces of connection – the

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Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean – leaving the relationship of modern Middle Eastern cities to other expansive circuits of exchange relatively unremarked upon. In bringing Aleppo's post-socialist and Chinese circuits into focus, I seek to add another trans-regional dimension to this critique of the area studies paradigm. This builds on the scholarship that has found the category of 'West Asia' helpful in transcending the geographical silos of the Cold War, and supports arguments that connections between West Asia and Eurasia should not simply be seen as novel or only through the lens of security studies, but as historically rooted and embedded in everyday life (Marsden and Mostowlansky 2019).

Another aim of the article is to identify the critical role that Chinese state subsidies and credit have played, both in drawing Aleppo into a trans-Asian economy since the early 2000s, and in reorganizing the social field of Syria's commercial bourgeoisie.<sup>1</sup> Much of the literature on Syria's political economy has emphasized the unevenness of economic liberalization since the early 1990s, documenting the emergence of business networks whose fortunes are wholly dependent on the regime's willingness to grant them monopolies and opportunities for rent (Kienle 1997). Haddad, notably, has drawn a distinction between an genuine established commercial bourgeoisie and a state-dependent bourgeoisie.<sup>2</sup> My fieldwork among Aleppine businessmen in 2008–09 and 2016, however, suggests the emergence of a new social group – entrepreneurs without a background in trade who, empowered in large part by the availability of Chinese credit channelled through commercial hubs such as Yiwu, have been able to challenge the dominance of the established commercial bourgeoisie in Syria. Finally, the trans-Asian channels established both by older and new Syrian merchants visiting China have also shaped the trajectories of some Syrians who have fled the conflict in their country since 2011.

### Perspectives on Aleppo: beyond the 'Oceanic turn'

In August 2016, Abduh Salakji, a Syrian-born merchant, sat most evenings at a table outside the café he owned in the Night Market area of Yiwu, a city in China's commercially dynamic South-Eastern Zhejiang region.<sup>3</sup> The café advertised itself to passersby in bright neon dots as 'Aleppo restaurant'. It had a menu to match, offering Arabic desserts, juices and nargileh pipes to a mixed international clientele who gathered to sample a taste of Aleppo on the pavement terrace which was carpeted with green synthetic grass. Aleppo restaurant was one of several Syrian eateries that clustered on a short stretch of road, the evening nargileh smoke breathing a Levantine atmosphere in the midst of this bustling downtown street market. A nearby shwarma café, run by a Druze family from the Jaramana suburb of Damascus, advertised itself using the name of a famous shwarma business in the old Midan quarter of the Syrian capital. 'Let's go to Midan', one young Syrian man suggested to his friends as they relaxed in a café a couple of miles away – meaning this place by the Night Market. For those with the local knowledge to interpret it – knowledge of suburbs the other side of Asia – this name layered a distinctly Syrian geography onto the city of Yiwu.

Such establishments attracted merchants of Syrian and other Arab nationalities, but also Chinese customers who sometimes stayed till the early hours of the morning. They had the money to consume, having benefited from the prosperity that Yiwu's Futian market had brought to the middle-class entrepreneurial strata in the city. The Futian market houses some 70,000 booths which serve as wholesale outlets for Chinese

manufacturers of small household items, ranging from toothbrushes and stationery to tools and kitchenware. Along with the nearby Huangyuan clothes market which houses around 5000 outlets, Futian makes Yiwu a significant node in the global trade in low-grade commodities: around 1700 containers are estimated to leave the city each day. These two mega-markets also make the city a hub where diverse trading networks intermingle, with several thousand merchants, principally from central and South Asia, Russia, the Arab world and Africa, resident in the city, and many more visiting on wholesale provisioning trips, sometimes several times per year, with each visit typically lasting between two to three weeks – during which time they would visit the market, inspect and order goods, and often visit the Night Market area and sites of hospitality like Abduh's in the evenings to relax, exchange information and establish new connections.

It was the Futian market that first attracted Abduh to China. His main business then as now was not the café, but the trading office in the floors above. He arrived in China in 2001, four years after the country joined the WTO, and just at the time that the Syrian regime was starting to the country to Chinese consumables. Having inherited in Presidency the previous year, Bashar al-Asad was embarking on a period in which he would negotiate free trade agreements and remove import tariffs on a variety of consumer goods – thus instituting a 'neoliberal autocracy' in which citizens were hailed as consumers, and where the desire for commodities and aspirations toward upward mobility replaced the personality cult of the leader as the primary mechanism of disciplinary control (Wedeen 2013). The connection to China was a vital part of this new era of ideological interpellation, and Aleppo's established commercial bourgeoisie were among the first to see the opportunities it presented. After a number of visits to select goods and arrange their cargo, Abduh settled in Yiwu and opened an export office organizing the shipment of consumer commodities that were to become central to the images of 'the good life' (Wedeen 2013, 842) newly circulating in Bashar al-Asad's Syria.

The Suwaiqa market in Aleppo was one of the points through which these commodities were channelled. Literally, the 'small market', Suwaiqa was a historic wholesale hub that lay just to the North of the city's covered bazaar. With Bashar's consumer-oriented economic opening, Suwaiqa was soon established as one of the main distribution nodes for Chinese commodities entering Syria. It became one of Futian's outpost markets in West Asia, as well as a staging post for small low-grade commodities from markets in the Chinese city of Guangzhou. Abduh was one of the first to establish these connections between Futian and Suwaiqa. He hailed from an old merchant family in Suwaiqa, one of a group of five intermarrying extended families who had been based in the market for generations. By moving to Yiwu, he gave the family a foothold in a highly profitable supply chain. Others were to follow; by the time I conducted fieldwork in Suwaiqa in 2008, every family was said to be sending sons to China, on short provisioning trips. Often these men, many in their twenties and thirties, had minimal Chinese language skills, but were able to deal with the market through offices like Salakji's, and others in the city, which provided services such as translation, checking of goods at the warehouse, and customs clearance.

This account of connections across Asia, which link Futian to Suwaiqa, and Aleppo to Yiwu, provides a different picture of Aleppo, and Syria more broadly, than that which is commonly found in scholarly literature in anthropology and history. This literature tends to privilege the framework of the nation state, in emphasizing Aleppo's status as a second city to Damascus and a site of historical opposition to the Baathist regime (Pinto 2011; Rabo 2005;

Shannon 2006), or in describing the dynamics of the Syrian conflict as a regionally isolated 'war economy' (see Anderson 2019 for a critique). Aleppo has often been portrayed as a provincial city, a shadow of its former glory as a trading post on the 'silk road', plagued with an inferiority complex in relation to Damascus or as a former bastion of Islamist opposition. But rather than pioneering resistance to the Baathist regime, merchants in Aleppo fashioned the city under Bashar al-Asad as a translocal trading space, connecting local and regional commodity markets with the emergence of China's export manufacturing sector. Viewing Aleppo from the night market in Yiwu, through the career trajectory and trading networks of men such as Abduh, highlights these Asian dynamics. It locates the city in a different framework from the nation state – one of expansive, trans-Asian connectivity. My aim in this article is not to provide an ethnographic account of mercantile life in Yiwu, but to treat it as a vantage point from which to rethink Aleppo, as a node – connected to other nodes such as Yiwu – in trans-Asian circuits of exchange.

One body of scholarly work that I have found helpful in describing the significance of these routes is literature in history and anthropology that seeks to reimagine the conceptual geography of West Asia. Some of this work has sought to historicize and critique the paradigm of area studies, and the associated category of the 'Middle East', arguing that these belong to a meta-geography of the Cold War, which looks increasingly outdated and which makes it difficult to give due recognition to connections and interactions that transcend these areas. The critique of an 'area studies' approach to West Asia has proceeded in two directions. One line of argument is that the notion of 'the Middle East' elides the formative role played by Muslim networks in shaping Europe. In particular, historical networks connecting the Levant, Egypt, Anatolia, South Europe and South East Europe into a single Mediterranean arena of exchange are ignored or marginalized in favour of a narrative which draws sharp borders between the 'European' and 'Muslim' worlds (Green 2014; Low 2014). Another line of argument has been that an area studies paradigm obscures connections with the Indian Ocean, and that the Red Sea, the Arabian peninsula and the Gulf are best understood as having been formed by historical connections – of empire and diaspora – linking them to East Africa, Iran, South West India and the Malay archipelago (Alavi 2015; Ghazal 2014; Ho 2004; Limbert 2014; Tagliacozzo 2009; Willis 2009). This work has sought to retrieve an 'Indian Ocean Middle East', long marginalized within area studies approaches which have privileged a post-Ottoman 'core' of Egypt-the Levant-Anatolia in narrating the history of the region (Low 2014).

Of these two lines of argument, one proceeds North and West across the Mediterranean, and the other proceeds South and East across the Indian Ocean. Both have been valuable in allowing a wider set of formative connections to come into view, in a part of the world long marked by trans-regional flows (Kurzman 2007). But it is also true that, since much of this scholarly energy for rethinking the region's boundaries comes from Indian Ocean studies, it has tended to privilege maritime arenas and models of connection. Green for example argues that 'shifting the primary geological marker of space from land to sea is one of the most productive means of formulating geographies of interaction' since as Mediterraneanists have long argued, 'foods, lifestyles, diseases, architectures, and commodities' circulate in a way poorly understood by 'land- and nation-based models' (Green 2014, 558). Others have suggested the smoother surface of water is more likely to foster expansive geographical imaginations and universalisms than the more rugged terrain of land (see e.g. Ho 2004).

Productive as this ‘oceanic turn’ has been, the interactions that I identify here – between Syria, post-Soviet Eurasia and East Asia – are not adequately illuminated by spatial models that take their inspiration from maritime circuits of exchange, or those that locate Syria primarily in a Levantine and therefore Mediterranean arena (see e.g. Green 2014). Nor are these interactions made visible by the category of the ‘post-Soviet world’ – as such studies have rarely incorporated the ‘Middle East’ despite the fact that Soviet and Russian patronage and influence have been a significant dynamic in this region since the 1950s. Yet, as I argue below, Syria’s Northern- and Eastern-facing connections have remained significant and even grown in importance since the end of the Soviet era. Syrian merchants continued throughout the 1990s to play a critical role in provisioning markets in Russia and central Asia, thus linking these regions to wider flows of trade. And the mercantile networks built by Syrian traders in this period, particularly in Moscow, became a base for establishing commercial networks on China’s Eastern coast in the 2000s. After China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001, Syrian traders such as those I introduce in this article played an important part in turning Aleppo’s wholesale bazaars into an outpost for Chinese commodity markets in Yiwu and Guangzhou. The trans-Asian connections they fostered came to shape local self-understandings in Syria, as Aleppo’s merchants styled their city ‘little China’ (al-Sin al-sghireh), and developed notions of success predicated on the city’s emerging status as a regional forwarding market for commodities imported from China.

So this article seeks to put Aleppo in a broader frame than the nation state or a putative cultural area defined by Arabness or Islam. In this sense it harnesses the winds of the ‘oceanic turn’, but it also seeks to look elsewhere than the Mediterranean in order to identify Aleppo’s recent arenas of connectivity, and to argue that not all expansive formative connections need to be formulated through the medium of the ocean. It considers the routes of merchants and commodities across two trans-regional circuits which, over the past forty years, have served to connect it, not westwards to the South of Europe, but northwards and eastwards. In doing so, I am indebted to literature that highlights the role dynamic trans-regional networks and ‘circulation societies’ have played in fashioning alternative geographies to those premised on nation states and bounded culture areas (Amrith 2013; Erkin 2010; Freitag and Von Oppen 2010; Marsden 2016).<sup>4</sup> I also find helpful perspectives that focus not on the transmission of cultural forms between discrete regions, but on the ‘recurring circulations that result in interpenetrated societies’ (Marsden and Mostowlansky 2019, 7). Henig, for example, demonstrates that Sufi networks blur the regions of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, by tracing the active connections of a brotherhood based in Bosnia with sites of religious experience in Mashhad, Istanbul and Northern Syria (Marsden and Henig 2019). Marsden makes a similar argument about the interpenetration of Eurasia and West Asia, showing that trading families from Central Asia have for centuries circulated between this region, the Arabian peninsula and Anatolia (Marsden and Henig 2019).

### Aleppo looking North and East: Soviet and post-Soviet Eurasia

The first of the circuits I consider connects Aleppo to the Soviet and post-Soviet world – Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia. When I conducted fieldwork in Suwaiqa in 2008–09, one of the merchants who was then in his sixties told me that he had started

imported kitchenware from Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, having travelled there as a young man on an extended tour of Eastern Europe. Socialist countries were also an important destination for Syrian exports in the 1970s and 1980s. As Volker Perthes has documented (1992, 219–220), Syria had amassed considerable debts to the Soviet Union – the large bulk of which were for weapons – and lacking foreign exchange, agreed in 1973 to settle these through the barter of goods. Under these payment agreements, the USSR and other countries in the socialist bloc would buy Syrian textiles – fabrics, carpets, clothes – as well as foodstuffs and accessories, and a corresponding amount would be taken off Syria's national debt. The Syrian central bank then paid the local manufacturer in local currency. Since the bulk of these debts were settled through clothes, it was often textile manufacturers in Aleppo who benefited the most. Many I knew in 2008 recalled the 1980s as a period when huge profits of two or three hundred percent could be made fairly easily. Russia was the most significant market, estimated at a third or more of all Syria's private exports; when the Eastern European bloc and other countries with payments agreements with Syria are included, that figure rises to 80% in 1989. In that year, Syrian exports to the USSR reached \$1 billion (Perthes 1992, 220, 229).

Official figures show that exports to the formerly socialist bloc declined dramatically after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Abboud 2010, 10). But I met entrepreneurs in Aleppo in 2008 who told me that many of the connections survived the collapse of the USSR. Some said that, after 1991, Russia lacked established commercial and financial relations beyond the ex-socialist bloc, and so continued to depend on Syrian factories for the first few years. Syrian entrepreneurs did however tell me in 2008 that the Russian export market, which had once been known for its relatively low quality standards (see also Perthes 1992, 219), became increasingly difficult for Syrian manufacturers to penetrate a few years after the break-up of the USSR. Some said that Syrian exporters had started to acquire a reputation for profiteering and poor quality; others noted that Russian consumer tastes went upmarket. In its place, some of Aleppo's textile exporters found demand for their relatively low-quality goods in post-Soviet central Asia, in newly independent resource-rich countries that were developing middle classes and markets for imported consumer goods. A former manager of one of the Aleppo's largest fabric factories claimed that he had been the first to sell into the market in Uzbekistan in 1993, and that a week after his first sale, the aeroplane from Tashkent was full of merchants seeking Aleppine fabrics, from clothes and carpets to sofa furnishings and curtain fabrics. Some of these markets continued to be important some fifteen years later: to take one example, a textile industrialist who employed around eighty workers in his factory in the North of Aleppo was seeking to open a sales office in Tashkent in 2009.

In part, the significance of these connections needs to be understood against a backdrop of barriers to other possible spaces of economic integration. In 1995, a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was proclaimed between the fifteen member states of the European Union and twelve Southern Mediterranean countries, with a vision of security and economic cooperation. But Syria did not ratify its participation until December 2008. This was partly because of concerns that the partnership would be unequal, imposing neoliberal economic governance on the Syrian economy, while failing to remove trade barriers associated with the European Common Agricultural Policy (Abboud 2010; Aita 2004; Habeeb 2002; Hourani 2004). But just as important, joining the Euro-Mediterranean partnership meant that Syrian exporters, the vast majority of whom were small and medium



businesses, would need to accept costly industrial standards, which was feasible only for the largest enterprises. Some of the Aleppine textile entrepreneurs who did export to EU countries told me that they regarded it as hazardous, because their manufacturing processes were often not able to guarantee the quality standards required by European markets.

Syrian merchants and policy makers, then, were faced with common question in the 1990s and 2000s: how to internationalize their commercial positions in a post-Soviet era, when European markets were difficult to penetrate. In the early years of Bashar al-Asad's Presidency, the regime established bilateral trading agreements with Turkey and various Arab countries, and entered a Greater Arab Free Trade Area (2005). These developments played an important role in fostering what entrepreneurs referred to Aleppo's 'industrial renaissance' (*al-nahda al-sina'iyya*). This renaissance was centred on textile and clothing exports, which according to official figures tripled from 2005 to 2006 (Said 2010, 40). But these bilateral agreements and the Arab Free Trade Area should not be understood simply as securing Syria's entry into a Southern and Eastern Mediterranean arena of connectivity. One of Syria's most significant trading agreements in the early 2000s was with Iraq (Arslanian 2009, 67). Subsequently, the 2003 allied invasion was to displace Iraqi capital and entrepreneurs into Syria. Aleppine businessmen told me in 2008 that the turmoil in Iraq and the decimation of much of its industrial base meant that Aleppo had become an important industrial and commercial node for supplying Iraqi markets. Moreover, Syrian entry into the Greater Arab Free Trade Area attracted Chinese, Korean, Russian and Iranian investments, which were seeking to exploit Syria's position as a 'conduit of broader regional and international trade' (Abboud 2010, 28). As well as attracting investment into the car manufacturing industry, the establishment of Free Trade Zones enabled Chinese firms to import goods into Syria and then re-export them to other Arab countries (Suleiman 2005).

Syria, then, increasingly looked East and North for its commercial fortunes. Aleppo's commercial bourgeoisie also adopted a similar model, fashioning their city as a hub of trans-border trade. In the 2000s, Aleppo became a manufacturing hub and a resale centre for Chinese small commodities, attracting wholesale customers from across the Arab world. Aleppo became a regional outpost of Chinese commodity markets, known locally as 'little China'. Some of the wealthier Syrian merchants invested in Chinese factories, designing and specializing in particular product lines. Stories circulated of Aleppine merchants purchasing a factory's entire annual output in advance, as they sought to monopolize a market; some claimed to be able to offer goods for sale in Aleppo at the same price or cheaper than their rivals could purchase them in China. One Armenian merchant from Aleppo was said to have monopolized the market in certain car spare parts in this way, selling Chinese products via Aleppo to customers across the Arab world, in the early 2000s; on a smaller but still significant scale, Abduh Salakji claimed to have established Aleppo as a wholesale centre supplying Iraq, Turkey and Syria with Chinese manufactured Christmas decorations and artificial flowers in the mid 2000s. He was proud, he said, to have made Aleppo the 'little China' (*al-sin al-sghireh*). These narratives of business success invariably proclaimed the regional significance of Aleppo as a resale centre supplying the rest of Syria and countries across the Arab world.

The yarn economy shows Aleppo playing a similar role as a trans-border and transasian hub. Textiles and clothes had long been the mainstay of Aleppo's manufacturing base

(Arslanian 2009; Cornand 1994). While cotton production remained largely in the hands of the state until 2011, polyester and mixed yarns were often imported by private merchants. When I conducted fieldwork in 2008–09, much of this was imported from Taiwan, Malaysia, China and India. These imports also formed the basis of a futures market centred on the Khan Ulabiyya caravanserai towards the Southern end of Aleppo's historic bazaar. Through this market, merchants committed in advance to buy wholesale quantities of yarn at a fixed price, and then sought to sell on the contract at a profit, often without ever seeing the yarn. The main material underlying this financial market was a Taiwanese polyester, the principal component used to weave fabrics from bedsheets to shirts for school and army uniforms. Malaysian yarn was a close competitor that some merchants had recently tried to use to displace the Taiwanese yarn. But the attempt failed; Taiwanese remained the most popular of the Far Eastern yarns, and formed the basis of a vibrant speculative economy, in which fortunes were both made and lost. Some merchants talked of buying and selling the same shipment dozens of times before it found its way onto a loom.

The transition of this Taiwanese yarn from a financial to an industrial circuit was a key moment in its 'biography' (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). Brokers described Taiwanese 316 as a 'virgin girl' which was 'pure' and, like 'water' in universal demand; once it entered the manufacturing process and was put onto the loom, it 'got married' and became harder to sell, 'like stock'. The futures market in virgin yarns was still operating every afternoon in a caravanserai in Aleppo's bazaar in 2008/09, as brokers gathered to make verbal contracts to buy and sell commodities that had not yet arrived in Syria. But Aleppo was not the only site where Taiwanese yarn 'got married'. Some of the Syrian principal merchants who commissioned these brokers to buy on their behalf also exported the yarn to Egypt, where it was sold on to textile manufacturers. Thus, Aleppo was a site of trans-regional connectivity, where Egyptian demand for Far Eastern commodities was brokered.

Other Syrian merchants, both resident in and visiting Yiwu, supplied markets in Russia, the Caucasus and central Asia with Chinese manufactured goods after 2000. By the 1980s, there was a significant community of Syrian merchants in Moscow, many of whom had been educated there under the Soviet patronage of Syria. Others migrated there in the 1980s, organizing the importation of Syrian goods into the USSR under the bilateral payments agreement; some also fled to Russia out of fear that they might fall under suspicion during the Asad regime's crackdown on Islamist opposition in 1979–82. Still others, of Circassian background, migrated from Syria to Russian cities in the Caucasus – Sochi, Nalchik and Kras – in the early 1990s during the Circassian national return movement after the fall of the USSR. After the Russian market for Syrian imports peaked in the mid-1990s, some moved back to Syria; others sought to open new markets in the central Asian ex-Soviet republics; and others moved to China in the early 2000s, where they opened export offices in Yiwu and Guangzhou, supplying markets in the Russia, the Caucasus and central Asia with cheap commodities, often through networks of Syrian and other Arab merchants resident in those locales. Cosmetics were a particularly important small commodity supplied to the Russian market via Yiwu in this way; but clothes, fashion accessories and household goods such as nargileh pipes were also shipped in significant quantities.

It is hard to overestimate the significance of the Russian market for establishing a Syrian mercantile presence in China in this period, prior to 2005. In 2005, Syria began establishing

free trade agreements with neighbouring countries which enabled it to act as a regional conduit and forwarding market for Chinese imports. The Syrian merchants in China who were able to dominate this import trade were invariably those who had already established themselves in Yiwu thanks to the Russian market, and their networks and history there. The commercial circuits connecting Syria to the rest of Asia shifted, then, with different scales of political and economic transformation: the decline of Soviet bloc manufacturing; the emergence of China's export-oriented manufacturing; and a more open embrace of trade liberalization within Syria. But these shifts did not signify the replacement of one set of trading routes with another. What emerged instead was a layering of different trading circuits: in this case, of a new China-GAFTA route onto an older circuit of mobility and trade between Syria, Russia and post-Soviet central Asia. This layering shows the dynamic fluidity of trans-regional connections, and the 'dense imprinting' (Green 2014, 558) of an earlier arena of Soviet-bloc connectivity onto an emerging trans-Asian route between China and the Arab world.

### Chinese credit reshaping Aleppine society

Aleppo was also an important distribution and resale site for consumables imported from China. Much of this activity was centred just North of the bazaar, in the Suwaiqa or 'little market'. Despite its diminutive name, this was, until 2012, a hub for the wholesale of goods ranging from toys, decorations and ornaments to shoes, fashion accessories and kitchenware. Merchants such as Abduh effectively established it as an outpost of wholesale markets in Yiwu and Guangzhou. They were facilitated in this by Chinese export policies, which incentivised foreign merchants by allowing them to recoup their purchase tax plus a bonus – worth up to 4% of the total shipment – when the goods arrived at their international destination. This export bonus was designed to establish the dominance of Chinese manufactured goods in Asian markets, and enabled importers in outpost markets from Suwaiqa to Aleppo to the Dragon Market in Dubai to pursue aggressive pricing strategies – in some cases offering Chinese commodities for sale in these sites in the 'Middle East' at virtually the same price that they could be purchased in China. In this sense, they were indeed able to make Aleppo a 'little China', as Abduh had claimed. If his 'Aleppo café' transposed a Syrian geography into China, his trading office above the café aimed to recreate part of Yiwu's Futian market in Syria. China's policy of subsidizing its manufactured exports by rewarding foreign importers with a bonus was a key dynamic in establishing these sites as its outposts in West Asia.

Among Aleppine merchants in both Yiwu and Aleppo, these pricing strategies were underpinned by a wholesale ethos – the notion that 'wholesale is beautiful' (al-jumla jamileh). In Aleppo in 2008, one Suwaiqa merchant put this ethos as follows, 'buy at ten and sell at ten, and find blessing in the middle'. In Yiwu in 2016, those who had left Suwaiqa still invoked this ethos to distinguish themselves from their Damascene counterparts, arguing that while Damascus traders measured the success of their business by the size of their profit margins, they used to measure it by volume. They recalled with pride Aleppo's former status as a primary wholesale hub. Hamudeh, Abduh's younger brother, now managed a mobile phone and accessories shop in Yiwu's downtown boulevard, Chouzhou Beilu. He recalled the flourishing of the Yiwu-Aleppo route before the crisis

broke in Syria: 'we were doing sixty containers a year!', he said, remembering volume not profit as a measure of the good times. Some Damascene traders in Yiwu recognized a similar distinction between Aleppine and Damascene approaches to reckoning success, but cast it in a different moral register. Salam, a Yiwu-based merchant in his early twenties, said 'in Aleppo, they are very traditional; they are happy with small margins and sell the same thing they were ten years ago. In Damascus, we innovate and add value ...' He saw a large profit margin as a measure of success in a moral register of invention (*al-ibtikar*) and modernity.

In Aleppo, the wholesale ethos and pricing strategies that I have described helped to ensure the continued dominance of established merchant families in the import trade. Aggressively low pricing strategies and the ethos that moralized them heightened barriers to new entrants, and reduced the incentive for their customers, whether in Syria or Russia, to seek to bypass them by travelling to China themselves. The entrenched position of the established families was however open to challenge particularly in the wake of the global economic shock caused by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2007. The financial stimulus policies pursued through China's state banking system channelled extra credit to export manufacturers. The Chinese announced a financial stimulus plan in Autumn 2008 which included a loosening of credit policies and bank loans to revitalize designated industries including the light industry sector (Tong 2010; Zhang 2015) which supplied the Futian market. These policies led to a 'massive increase in bank lending, particularly in the first half of 2009' (Lardy and Subramanian 2011, 1). In order to tackle the slowdown in export growth, in December 2008 the government also requested the four major state-owned banks to increase their lending to small and medium enterprises in particular; they duly extended around half of their additional credit to this sector in first five months of 2009 (Schüller and Schüller-Zhou 2009). Additionally, the government supported export demand through VAT rebates on low-cost goods which proved 'popular in the cost-conscious emerging markets' of Asia, Africa and Latin America (Schüller-Zhou 2009, 171).

This credit and the VAT rebate were increasingly passed on to foreign importers. In Yiwu, the credit and rebates were organized and channelled through foreign trading companies. Many of these were listed on the Futian market's register, providing manufacturers and their agents with some means of assessing customer credit risk. Several of the trading companies I spoke to in 2016 spoke of free credit being offered by manufacturers. Others observed that the willingness of some foreign trading companies to extend this credit to newcomers who had little or no commercial or credit record had transformed the market, claiming it had enabled individuals to visit Yiwu 'with five or six thousand dollars' in their pocket, and to walk away with a container load of commodities worth \$25,000 or more.

The availability of this credit had in turn attracted merchants from relatively modest backgrounds in Syria to enter the domain of international trade. It increased the number of merchants moving between Aleppo and Yiwu. Many of the Syrians I knew who had imported from China dated their first experiences in China to 2007 or later. Some settled in Yiwu, as Abduh had done years earlier, to establish trading companies in order to unlock access to the credit. Often these were young men sent abroad by their families in order to channel credit to relatives and networks within Syria. Another development which had facilitated the entrance of new players was the establishment of a market in cargo companies, which rented out space in shipping containers by the

square metre (see also Pliez 2012). This removed the burden of filling an entire container – which for higher value goods such as cosmetics or tools could require a capital of \$100,000 or more. Some dated the establishment of this market to 2007. Those who could afford to purchase an entire container saved costs, and often clubbed together with trusted partners in order to do so. But cargo companies enabled individuals who were not yet embedded in such networks to find an entry point into the market.

These developments altered the social field of wholesale commerce in Aleppo, facilitating the emergence of a relatively new social group of merchants, without an established family heritage of commerce. Abu Tayyan is an example – a man who was in his late forties when he first visited Yiwu in 2008. He had been born in Aleppo of Circassian descent to a father had held an administrative post in the military; he had learned accounting as an adult, and freelanced for various textile entrepreneurs, getting to know other men who, like himself, often did not hail from merchant families but who were, after 2000, fashioning careers as factory managers and in some cases as owner-manufacturers during the ‘renaissance’ of Aleppo’s textile industries. With access to these new business networks, he was able to establish informal capital-pooling partnerships, to finance his entry into international trade. After his first trip to the Futian market, he returned every three months, importing goods ranging from artificial pearls to executive massage chairs – which he used his now proliferating business networks to distribute. He spent extended periods – sometimes more than one year – living abroad, in Malaysia and Russia – where he also established distribution networks. As he established a reputation in these international networks grew, he was also able to act as a broker and commission worker for Aleppo’s textile exporters, putting them in touch with foreign importers for a cut of the deal.

Many of the entrepreneurs for whom Abu Tayyan acted in this way were, like him, newcomers to Aleppo’s commercial bourgeoisie. They had worked their way up – as labourers, professional accountants or as managers – before becoming business partners or sole traders. The merchants imported consumables from China into Syria; the industrialists sold textiles within Syria but also in some cases exported to Turkey, Central Asia, Russia, the Emirates and the horn of Africa. These networks were often based outside the historic bazaar complex and Suwaiqa, in industrial zones on Aleppo’s urban periphery. Before the conflict, Abu Tayyan would spend much of his working day visiting factories in these areas, renewing and extending his business acquaintances. These business networks represent a little studied social group, relatively unremarked upon in the scholarly literature on Syria’s political economy and business landscape. This literature often draws a distinction between an authentic, autonomous commercial bourgeoisie active in sectors such as textiles, consumer imports and light manufactured goods, and a state-dependent bourgeoisie whose wealth depends solely on political connections to the regime and opportunities for rent and monopoly control that these create. While the latter are said to be from ‘mixed’ and often ‘humble’ social backgrounds, the former hail from long-established merchant families, and urban backgrounds; and there is tension between the two. Yet the networks to which Abu Tayyan and his associates belonged represent a third group: outside of the state bourgeoisie and active in the textile and light manufactured sector; yet seen by many in the established commercial bourgeoisie as unwelcome newcomers and as outsiders to their own networks of credit and political support. Some of the more established trading families responded to this competition by foregrounding their own genealogies as a claim to moral

(rather than purely social) distinction: talking dismissively of the ‘crowd’ (*al-zahmeh*) who had lowered the ethic of commercial ‘interaction’ (*al-ta’amu*).

Crucially, it was the trans-Asian connections – notably with China, the Emirates and Central Asia – that enabled this group to emerge and flourish. Abu Tayyan credited China with his entry into international business; when I asked him about the Futian market in Yiwu, he said ‘that is where all my money came from!’ China’s response to the global financial crisis of 2007/08 was a transforming moment: it made credit cheap and accessible enough to entice relatively inexperienced businesspeople and small traders into trans-Asian trade. In doing so, it helped to reshape Aleppo’s mercantile hierarchies. It was not the only factor – others included the growing market for consumption in Syria that was fed by an influx of Iraqi refugees and capital, and of excess liquidity from the Gulf, that led to a real estate boom and its associated ‘wealth effect’ (Abboud 2010). But the increasing accessibility of China’s export markets was a critical development. It also led to a diversification of tastes within Syria. In 2008, Mahmood left the family business in Suwaiqa after a dispute in which his family sought to block his marriage to his fiancée. With a business partner, he opened a new kitchenware outlet in one of Aleppo’s affluent Western suburbs, taking Hamzi, a young teenager who had been working in the Suwaiqa shop, with him. At first, he provisioned the business through Suwaiqa’s wholesalers, but soon realized that more money could be made in the affluent suburb by offering new designs and catering to different tastes. In a bid to establish a unique line of goods, Mahmood began travelling direct to Yiwu to provision his store independently. He invested in a warehouse in the East of Aleppo near Hamzi his assistant’s neighbourhood, and later expanded by opening a new store in the town of al-Bab, sixty kilometres East of Aleppo. Unmediated access to the wide range of goods in Yiwu’s wholesale market allowed him to make his own decisions about how to meet and shape consumer tastes.<sup>5</sup> And cheap and accessible Chinese credit and cargo companies enticed new entrants into the export market and allowed retailers and petty wholesalers to experiment with new styles and tastes.

### The Syrian conflict and trans-Asian mobilities

The Chinese state’s injection of credit post 2007/8 drew more of Aleppine society into an Asian economy of circulation. We see this played out in some of the trajectories that emerged in response to the Syrian conflict four years later. Mahmood opened his third kitchenware store in downtown Aleppo, less than a kilometre from the Suwaiqa complex, a week before the Arab protests of 2011 reached Aleppo. When I met his assistant Hamzi five and a half years later in Yiwu, he recounted to me how he had experienced the first three years of the crisis in his country. Broadly speaking, the conflict divided the city into a government-held area covering the affluent Western suburbs, and a rebel-held area to the East of the citadel. This geography roughly coincided with a line that mercantile elites, who mostly lived in the West, used to draw before the conflict, between ‘sophisticated’ (*raqi*) and ‘working class’ or ‘popular’ (*sha’bi*) areas. While it would be easy to assume that such a geography would have divided Hamzi and Mahmoud, since they hailed from different sides of the divide, in fact the conflict intensified their connections. Rather than simply returning home to live with his family in the East, Hamzi spent many nights in the West of the city, sleeping on the floor of one of Mahmoud’s stores. One of his tasks was to



travel to the warehouse in the East of the city, and transport its contents to the shops in the West, one handtrolley at a time. This was a journey that involved navigating a perilous kilometre-long crossing between rival checkpoints, sometimes passing underneath sniper fire. He did not seem to have made these journeys unwillingly; but referred to Mahmoud as ‘more than a brother’ – a man who had even gone to the extent of inviting him to celebrate the eid festival with his own family.

Hamzi also ran considerable risks for Mahmoud by making several trips to provision the store in al-Bab. Business here could be brisk: he remarked that far from holding up trade, the various checkpoints and crossings into Free Syrian Army and Daesh territory often imposed fewer tariffs and sought fewer bribes than those controlled by the regime. He spoke in 2016 of a fairly vibrant trade from Mersin in Turkey, across into a region North West of the Euphrates tributaries controlled by the Free Syrian Army, and then into Daesh territory and Northern Iraq. Electrical goods, engines and spare parts were particularly good business, as were chickens to feed the fighters. There was also a marriage economy in Daesh territory which created demand for trousseaus of kitchenware and household goods. Hamzi recalled the ease with which he could blend into Daesh territory, simply by letting his beard grow for a few days, hitching his trousers up above his ankles, and heading straight for the mosque when the azan was called. What he really feared, he said, was being arrested at a regime checkpoint for evading military service. One day he was caught, and beaten continuously for an hour, and extracted only after some payments were made. Mahmoud decided he should leave the country. He found him a position in a trading office in Yiwu, and took his passport and arranged a visa, before presenting Hamzi with a *fait accompli*. ‘He didn’t ask me first’, Hamzi said, ‘he opened a project for me, he sent me’ – literally, he ‘travelled’ me (*saffarni*).

The closeness that drew two men together from rival sides of the city, which led Hamzi to run these risks and to accept Mahmoud’s decision to ‘travel’ him, might at first seem surprising. It needs to be understood at least in part in the context of the promise and possibility held out by the two men’s incorporation into Yiwu’s export economy. Their close relationship was born in 2008 out of the import of Chinese commodities, and it held together after 2011 in part because of the shared sense of a future that might revolve around the Yiwu-Aleppo axis. Hamzi told me that while he was not shipping many goods to Mahmoud now, he remained close to him and envisaged a future partnership, in which the knowledge he was acquiring of Chinese and of the Yiwu market would help Mahmoud. He could have gone West to Europe, he said, where he had relatives. But he had travelled to China because he thought that it would be helpful for his future once the war had ended in Syria. China did not offer citizenship, as Europe did. But citizenship in Europe meant waiting for years for papers, during which time it was not possible to leave the country or travel back to Syria. It also meant assuming the status of ‘refugee’, which among young Syrian men in Yiwu was understood as closing off possibilities for mobility and work. To be in China meant to be part of an Asian economy of movement, that allowed individuals to travel back and forth including to Syria – between, we might say, West and East Asia.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Europe, which was seen as relatively impermeable to the kinds of commodities in which they specialized,<sup>7</sup> these Asian connections were understood to provide opportunities for trajectories of work and personal mobility.

Hamzi, then, did not travel to Yiwu as a refugee. Like many of the young Syrian men in their late teens and early twenties who worked in Yiwu’s shops, restaurants and



trading offices, he spoke of avoiding 'the army' (*al-jaysh*) – or military service – as an important reason for leaving Syria. But no-one I knew identified themselves as a 'refugee' (*laji'*), and Yiwu was not a refuge in the sense of a detached locale situated at the end of a linear trajectory of flight. Instead, Hamzi's decision to travel East to Yiwu – or to let himself be 'travelled' there – was informed by a range of economic and personal considerations, including his relationship with Mahmoud, all of which were premised on the likely continuity of the trans-Asian ties that Aleppo's merchants had already established. Like other young Syrian men, he came to Yiwu not just for refuge, but as part of a strategy – often a family strategy – of putting a foothold in China that would be useful when the war ended. In the meantime, Yiwu remained connected to Syria in important ways. Many were sending remittances, some had made return journeys to Syria to visit family and assess the changing economic situation. Some commercial links remained active: a majority of the advertisements for cargo companies in the city's Arabic-language trade magazine promoted Syria as the main destination. Their patterns of mobility after 2011 reinscribed an Asian arena of circulation, which had been fashioned by a previous generation of merchants who had brought China to Aleppo, and Aleppo to China.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to bring scholarly attention to shifting mercantile networks that have, over the last forty years, connected Aleppo to countries in the formerly Soviet bloc and, more recently, to Chinese cities that act as wholesale hubs for the global trade in low-grade commodities, on the other. International merchants during this period fashioned Aleppo as a trans-local trading space which fed Soviet demand for textiles; the same mobile merchants then connected post-Soviet commodity markets in Russia with the emergence of China's export manufacturing sector. Their trans-Asian forms of mobility and investment also helped to secure Aleppo's status as a regional commercial and manufacturing hub supplying markets in Turkey, the Caucasus and the Arab world. By focusing on these trans-regional connections that had shaped the city's social and economic dynamics, I have sought to offer an alternative perspective from the usual framing of Aleppo as a second city to Damascus, whose wings had been clipped by the nation state which cut it off from its Anatolian and Iraqi hinterland. Many scholarly accounts of Aleppo under Baathist rule have portrayed it as a shadow of its former glory, plagued with a second city complex in relation to Damascus. Others had cast Aleppo as a bastion of political antipathy or former Islamist opposition to the Baathist regime. Rather than thinking in terms of the nation state, or the resistance that tradition could offer to Baathist modernity, Aleppine merchants sought with some success under Bashar al-Asad to establish the city as an outpost of the emerging Chinese markets in low-grade consumer goods.

This article shows that a consideration of shifting, overlapping, long-distance trading connections is vital in order to understand changes in local political economies in the 'Middle East' or rather West Asia. A historical and trans-regional perspective also helps to explain the resilience of Syrian entrepreneurship in different parts of Asia. The demise of the Soviet Union made Syrian traders even more important to a post-socialist economy in the 1990s. A decade later, the response of China's state banking system to

the 2008 global economic shock pumped cheap credit into its trans-Asian networks, which in turn allowed Syria's small wholesalers, retailers and those without any background in trade to become international importers. They were thus able to play an increasing role in mediating Syria's emerging relationship with the Chinese state, and their rise reshaped existing hierarchies in the country's commercial bourgeoisie. The circuits of trans-Asian mobility that they established took on renewed significance during the Syrian conflict, as Yiwu became a destination for some Syrian men seeking to escape military service, and envisaging economic strategies which they dreamt of implementing after stability returned. Methodologically, focusing on their career trajectories and on their physical paths of mobility, both before and after the Syrian uprising and subsequent conflict, enables us to place Aleppo in an Asian arena. It allows us to contemplate expansive trading connections without invoking a maritime imagination, and to rethink the conceptual geography of the region without having to confine Syria to the Mediterranean world.

## Notes

1. I use 'commercial bourgeoisie' to refer to class strata which own and operate trading businesses from commercial premises. In Syria, this comprises a middle stratum of retail store-owners; an upper-middle stratum of small commercial, industrial and merchant capitalists who dispose of enough capital to participate in manufacturing and wholesale trade; and an upper stratum comprising merchants and industrialists who, because of the extent of their capital investments, are recognised as important players in the markets in which they operate.
2. Haddad (2011) distinguishes between a 'commercial bourgeoisie' who operate in competitive markets, and a 'state bourgeoisie' (Haddad 2011) who enjoy political and economic monopolistic power in a given field as clients of the ruling family or of its networks of high-ranking security and intelligence personnel.
3. on Yiwu, see Marsden (2015, 2016, 2017).
4. In identifying circuits of exchange that are not premised on maritime models of geography, I am drawing attention to the limitations of the (otherwise productive) oceanic turn in enabling trans-regional connections to come into view. I am not seeking to explain the formation of trans-Asian routes by distinguishing between terrestrial and maritime modes of transport. I am grateful to an anonymous History and Anthropology reviewer for clarifying this point.
5. Some Syrian merchants resident in and visiting the city said that Yiwu allowed them to innovate market tastes in Syria by sourcing new products and designs; and stressed the importance of keeping new products secret from their competitors until they had reached the market. For this reason, some were reluctant to deal with trading offices in Yiwu which acted as suppliers as well as agents for the Syrian market.
6. In the case of Syrian traders, the scope of this mobility included sites which afforded opportunities to renew visas and travel permits – notably Malaysia and Sudan.
7. see Marsden (2016, 16) for similar distinctions drawn by Afghan merchants between Asia and the formerly Soviet world, on the one hand, and Western Europe, on the other.

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## Beyond Bukhara: Trade, identity and interregional exchange across Asia

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## Beyond Bukhara: Trade, identity and interregional exchange across Asia

Magnus Marsden

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the nature of inter-Asian trade dynamics through a consideration of the role played by traders from northern Afghanistan's Central Asian borderlands in the Chinese international trade city of Yiwu. It explores the role that traders from this region have played in commercial exchanges involving China, the Arabian Peninsula and a range of settings in West Asia. In addition to documenting the inter-Asian scope of these traders' activities, the article also addresses the shifting nature of their identity formations in relationship to successive waves of migration. The traders often identify themselves in relationship to ethno-national identity categories (Turkmen, Uzbek and Tajik) that are politically salient in Central Asia and Afghanistan today. At the same time, the traders also emphasise their being from families that migrated from the territories of the Emirate of Bukhara during the early years of communist rule in the 1920s and 1930s.

### KEYWORDS

Trade; Afghanistan; Bukhara; Turkey; Saudi Arabia; China; inter-Asia; identity

## Introduction

This article focuses on the role played by traders from Northern Afghanistan's Central Asian borderlands in facilitating commercial exchanges between China, the Arabian Peninsula and a range of settings in West Asia. It explores in particular the activities across these contexts of traders who both identify themselves in relationship to a range of ethnic categories salient in Afghanistan and Central Asia today – especially Turkmen, Uzbek and Tajik – as well as the descendants of families from Bukhara (*az Bukhara*) who emigrated from the Soviet Union to Afghanistan in the 1920s and 1930s. In the context of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, these families moved from Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia in the early 1980s, often staying for several years in cities and towns in Pakistan. Over the past three decades, such Central Asian émigré families (who mostly hold Afghan, Pakistani and increasingly Turkish nationality/travel documents) have established themselves as significant actors in the import to the Arabian Peninsula of commodities made in China.<sup>1</sup>

The article builds on and seeks to contribute towards two bodies of literature that cross the boundaries of history and anthropology and fall within the study of 'Inter-Asian' connections and circulations. An expanding body of work has sought to shed light on the dynamic relations between adjacent parts of Asia through a focused consideration of

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changes and continuities in the movement of people, ideas, and things, as well as the 'nodes', 'way-stations' and 'choke points' that such forms of movement also produce and require (e.g. Ho 2006; Tagliacozzo 2013). This scholarship has brought recognition to the significance of connections between geographical Asian settings that had previously been obscured because of the 'sub-regional' frame of analysis (e.g. Amrith 2013). This body of work has focused on the role played by newer and older types of networks in facilitating transregional connections and circulations across adjacent contexts. While such contexts had been historically connected to one another, they came to be thought of as belonging to distinct world regions as a result of the development of area studies in the Cold War context (e.g. Kotkin 2007; Henig 2016). Scholarship in this vein has done a great deal to challenge the notion that the nation-state and the sub-region are always the most relevant geographical scales of analysis.

A second body of literature that I have found helpful in the analysis of the ethnographic material presented in this article concerns the complex nature of Muslim networks that criss-crossed the borders of the Ottoman, British and Russian Empire at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This literature has complicated the assumption earlier that such connections inevitably constituted a step towards the emergence of international identity formation, such as Pan-Turkism, Pan Turanism, or Pan-Asian thinking (e.g. Reynolds 2009; Meyer 2014; Brophy 2016). Instead, scholarship demonstrates how the individuals involved in such forms of border-crossing mobility were as much concerned with the pragmatic concerns of trade and political stability as they were with ideologies or identity projects. There is also growing recognition of the ways in which such networks were viewed from the perspective of empires and government officials. While Russian imperial officials did see long-distance networks made-up of Muslims as a potential source of subversive religious thought and action, they also recognised the ways in which such networks could be harnessed to further the stretch imperial power beyond territorial borders (Kane 2015). Networks were indeed exploited as a source of revenue and of modern trading practices, not least because Russian merchants were regarded as being less adaptable and capable of risk-taking trade than Muslim merchants in this period (Monahan 2015).

This article seeks to make a contribution to these parallel developments in the field of inter-Asian studies in two ways. It aims, firstly, to analytically extend the understanding of Inter-Asian dynamics by exploring not merely transregional connections forged by networks operating across adjacent regions, but, additionally, the connective role being played by 'mobile societies' from one Asian sub-region (Central Asia) in two further Asian settings (West and East Asia). The study of inter-Asian dynamics brings to light connections between regions. But it also requires scholars to disassemble assumed relationships between different Asian contexts, and to reassemble these from the point-of-view of the actors under study. This process of reassembling requires a rethinking of the role played by polities in such processes: something widely demonstrated by the ubiquitous use of the term 'transnationalism' in the analysis of long-distance networks, and the rise of scholarship contesting 'methodological nationalism'. As Engseng Ho has recently argued, however, a fuller understanding of transregional dynamics also requires a model of society that can embrace the type of 'small, mobile, and less integrated' social formations that have largely not been encompassed by the study of the social science-based study of large scale social aggregates (Ho 2017). In what follows, I respond to Engseng Ho's call for



‘thick transregionalism’ – ‘a spatially expansive, integrative account of a mobile society’ – by presenting an account of multiple ‘partial communities’ that are connected to each other in the context of an Asia-wide arena of circulation and interaction (Ho 2017; cf. Ho 2014).

The second contribution of this article relates to my interest in the activities of Central Asian inland merchants in the maritime nodes of Arabia (Jeddah) and the Mediterranean (Istanbul). An analysis of this brings to light a specific type of node that is of particular value for anthropologists and historians concerned by Inter-Asian dynamics. There has been a tendency in much of existing literature in anthropology on Inter-Asian dynamics to focus on one of multiple geographical axes of inter-Asian interaction (e.g. Eurasian/Indian Ocean/West–East Asia dynamics). Yet the traders who are the focus of this article bring sharply into focus nodes such as Yiwu, Jeddah, Istanbul at which different axes of Inter-Asian interaction collide. Such nodes offer a privileged site for tracking shifts in the identity formations of established trading networks, the ways in which such shifts relate to the strategies of states in relationship to such mobile societies, and the transforming circumstances of the traders themselves.

### Afghan traders in Yiwu

I first became aware of the significance of Yiwu as a node for the activity of Afghan merchants in relationship to research I conducted into the commercial activities of Afghanistan in the former Soviet Union, especially Russia and Ukraine (Marsden 2016a, 2016b). During research in Yiwu in 2016, however, I came to recognise that Yiwu was a significant node not merely for traders involved in the sale of Chinese-made ‘small commodities’ (especially toys, hardware items, and souvenirs) in the former Soviet Union and Afghanistan, but also across a range of world regions. During many evenings spent chatting with the traders in restaurants, cafes and shisha parlours, I was introduced to merchants purchasing commodities in Yiwu who were visiting the city from Pakistan, Iran, Malaysia, the UAE, the USA and Canada, and Western Europe.

I also met several traders from Afghanistan in Yiwu who told me of their businesses in Saudi Arabia – a country in which the port city of Jeddah was described as being a base both for Afghan merchants and community life more generally. One of the restaurants I visited most frequently was owned by traders from Northern Afghanistan who had lived intermittently in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE since having left Afghanistan in 1983. The owner of the establishment had recently moved his family to India, where he said the cost of life was cheaper and the standard of education higher than in the UAE. Furthermore, many of the merchants who gathered in this restaurant to eat, drink green tea, and chat while relaxing in the Afghan-style carpeted floor seating area told me that either they or their families owned homes in Turkey, most especially Istanbul.

The majority of these traders identify themselves as being ethnically Turkmen, and as having been born in Afghanistan’s Northern provinces, especially Balkh, Kunduz and Jowzjan. Turkmen-speakers constitute a very small minority in modern day Afghanistan, and these provinces are, indeed, ethnically mixed regions that are home to populations of Farsi and Uzbek – speaking Muslims, as well as to substantial communities of Pashtuns, most of which were relocated to Northern Afghanistan by Pashtun state officials at the turn of the twentieth century (e.g. Tapper 1973; cf. Fuoli 2017). Thus, while traders who identify themselves as being Turkmen are most visible in the trade between China and

Saudi Arabia, Uzbek and Farsi-speaking merchants also play a critical role in such activities. There is also frequent interaction across the social and economic spheres between traders who identify with these distinct identity registers. Several traders informed me that they are from 'mixed' backgrounds, being descended from a Farsi-speaking 'Tajik' mother and Uzbek-speaking father, for instance.

The activities of Northern Afghan traders active in Saudi are widely known by Yiwu-based Afghans who work in different world regions. Indeed, from the perspective of Afghan traders based in Yiwu, their compatriots who run businesses in Jeddah are said to be some of the wealthiest Afghans abroad and involved in the most stable and high scale trading activities: 'a small business in Jeddah', I was often told in Yiwu, 'means at least 10 containers of goods transported between China and Saudi per month'. Traders of Afghan background are major exporters of clothing and machine-made carpets from China to Saudi Arabia. The sale of these commodities in Saudi Arabia is connected to the annual hajj pilgrimage, during which Muslim pilgrims from across the world purchase these items as gifts to take home to their relatives and friends (Kenny 2007). Given the importance of Northern Afghanistan for the worldwide trade in carpets (Spooner 1986), traders have a long history of being involved in the supply of prayer mats and carpets more generally both to hajj pilgrims and to the markets of the Gulf. During fieldwork in Jeddah I was told how until the 1970s hajjis coming from Afghanistan to the Holy Cities would bring hand-knotted carpets with them in the overland convoys (*carawan*) in which they travelled, and sell these in Jeddah, Mecca, and Madina, both to pilgrims and also buyers from Yemen. By the 1990s much of this trade appears to have shifted toward the import of machine-made carpets from Turkey, especially the Eastern city of Gaziantep, a commercial activity in which traders from Northern Afghanistan based in both Jeddah and Istanbul played an active role. In the last decade, an increasing proportion of the prayer mats are imported from China.

### **Bukhara: from trading node to regional periphery**

The traders whose activities are documented below largely identify their homes in Afghanistan as being in the country's North-West and North East. Today, these Afghan provinces all lie on the border with the former Soviet Republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Until the consolidation of the Afghan state this region was made-up of various dynasties involved in tributary relationships both with the Emirate of Bukhara as well as with polities to the East and the South (Lee 1996). After the delineation of an international boundary by the Afghan Boundary Commission in the mid-nineteenth century (Fuoli 2017), the region formed Afghan Turkestan, which shared a border with the Emirate of Bukhara/Russian Turkestan. Most of the traders described below are from families that moved permanently to Afghan Turkestan in the late 1920s in the wake of Stalinist purges of notables, wealthy peasants, and religious authorities in Central Asia (Khalid 2014). This period also saw the progressive rigidification of the border between Soviet Central Asia and Afghanistan (e.g. Marsden and Hopkins 2012). Many of my informants inform me that their families had been merchants and craftsmen ever since moving to Afghanistan. Some of the families appear to have turned to trading after leaving their home villages and towns in Central Asia; others talk about their families as having been merchants before leaving Central Asia (Jalallar 2011).

Bukhara was a historic site of transregional Asian trade that involved merchants from the region travelling to Iran, Muscovy, Siberia, China and India. Burton (1993) documented the wide range of contexts that were important to the activities of Bukharan merchants between 1558 and 1718. Merchants from Bukhara made trading sorties across this period to Iran, Muscovy, Siberia, China and India. On the course of these sorties they both transported goods from Bukhara for sale (especially the region's high-quality cotton materials, and furs largely made from sheepskin), and purchased goods for sale either in Bukhara or another region in which Bukharan merchants were active: rhubarb purchased in China and Siberia was thus sold in Iran, where it was regarded as an essential medicinal ingredient.<sup>2</sup> Officials frequently imposed barriers on the ability of Bukharan merchants to operate across these contexts. In the wake of the Turkish invasion of Vienna, Muscovy's Tsars imposed restrictions on the movement of Bukharan Muslim merchants. Not all Bukharan merchants operated in this mobile manner. Burton also identifies the role played by individual merchants who were permanently settled outside of the Emirate to the activities of merchants based in the Emirate. In Siberia, for example, settled Bukhara merchants both owned land and ran businesses (see Monahan 2015). In addition to dealing with far away people and their rulers, Bukhara's merchants also engaged in close trading relations with the communities surrounding the urban centres in which they were based: they collected fur and carpets from Turkmen tribes and provided Bukhara's elite with fermented mare's milk.<sup>3</sup>

Over the nineteenth century the Emirate of Bukhara was gradually incorporated into the Russian Empire and in later years the Soviet Union: this led to the demise of the city's historic status as an urban commercial centre (Humphrey, Marsden, and Skvirskaja 2009). In the wake of the establishment of the Soviet Union, however, a proportion of Bukhara's commercial community left Central Asia, moving into present-day Iran, Afghanistan, Chinese Turkestan, and India (e.g. Nasiri and Khalili 2013). Having left Central Asia, some of the Central Asian émigré s settled in the contexts to which they had initially moved: Northern Afghanistan continues to be home to substantial communities of Central Asian émigrés (Shahrani 2001). Other émigré families, however, migrated out of these neighbouring regions, most frequently to the holy cities of the Hejaz, Mecca and Madinah. In the Hejaz, there were pre-existent communities of Central Asians who had initially travelled to Arabia with the intention of making the hajj pilgrimage, but later stayed on either because they lacked the funds to return home or sought to benefit from the opportunities offered by acting as middleman between Arab guides and Central Asian pilgrims.<sup>4</sup> In later years, these communities were joined by émigrés from Chinese Turkestan fled who either fled after the collapse of the Turkistan state in 1949 or found themselves conducting pilgrimage in Arabia as the events in China unfolded.

Bukharan émigré s who remained in Northern Afghanistan adapted to a new set of circumstances in Afghan Turkestan.<sup>5</sup> After moving to Afghanistan, the trade of lamb pelt (karakul) continued to be of importance to members of the community, which also became active in related commercial fields, such as the sale of meat and skins (Crews 2015).<sup>6</sup> Northern Afghanistan's fur trade had also attracted Farsi-speaking Afghan Jewish traders and financiers based in the cities of Kabul and Herat, as well as Ashkenazi and Bukharan Jews who had fled the violence that affected their lives and commercial activities in Baku, Bukhara, Samarqand, and Tashkent from 1918 onwards.<sup>7</sup> Afghan government officials argued that Bolshevik agents were working in Afghanistan under the guise

of being Jewish traders, resulting in the expulsion of Jewish Central Asian émigrés from Afghanistan, and, eventually, the departure of a significant proportion of the country's sizeable Jewish community to Palestine (Koplik 2003). Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that traders today intermittently suggest that some members of their community are 'originally' (*asli*) Bukharan Jews who converted to Islam only after having moved to Afghanistan from the Soviet Union.

The modern trade in 'Bukharan' carpets to European and American markets stretches to the eighteenth century (Spooner 1986). From 1960s to the present day some of Afghanistan's most well-known merchants came from families that had crossed the Amu Darya and migrated to Afghanistan in the late 1920s and 1930s. Such merchants were especially respected for the role they played in innovating the production and distribution of carpets, most especially by 'establishing small factories in Northern Afghanistan that employed men and children to weave cheap carpets specifically for the Western market' (Spooner 1986, 216–17), opening transport companies that connected the cities of Northern Afghanistan to Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Germany, as well as for creating international business networks, most especially in the centres of the carpet trade, Hamburg and Istanbul.

The case of Agha Qilich and his family is a good example of a 'mobile family' that operates across different political regimes and negotiates both multiple historical ruptures and more gradual transformations. A brief consideration of Qilich Agha's life history highlights the ways in which individual merchant have been as much concerned with the pragmatic concerns of trade in an overall context of political flux as with adherence to specific identity projects. Qilich Agha is renowned by merchants across Afghanistan and its diasporas for having created an international distribution market for Turkmen carpets made in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Qilich Agha opened warehouses in Istanbul and later Hamburg (a historic centre for the carpet trade in Western Europe); he also financed the construction of a market complex in Kabul, the Qilich Agha market: this market now houses the wholesale shops and offices of carpet dealers from across Northern Afghanistan. In addition to being a significant player in the carpet industry and trade, Qilich is also said to be been successful in his trading operations in Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan was created in 1924 as a constituent Republic of the Soviet Union in 1924, before becoming an independent Republic after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.<sup>8</sup> After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Qilich Agha exported petrol and oil from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, navigating the country's complex political dynamics and mediating between its government and the Taliban government who controlled much after Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. Qilich Agha is said to have made some less profitable investments during this period in Turkey, seeking to open carpet producing factories in the town of Tokat – a town in the mid-Black Sea region of Anatolia to which dozens of Turkmen families were resettled by the Turkish government in the 1980s. He is often said to have passed his final years consigned to a care home in Germany, while his offspring failed to demonstrate the commercial acumen of their father.

### **Oil, wheat, and Chinese-made vodka bottles: Afghan Turkmen traders in Central Asia**

Understanding the growing significance of ethnically Turkmen traders to Afghanistan's international trading connections after the 1980s requires a brief consideration of their

activities in Central Asia before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. After 1991, thousands of Afghans who identified themselves as being Turkmen, moved to Turkmenistan in order to escape civil war in Afghanistan. For those who had served in the pro-Soviet government, and had connections through politics and education to the governments of countries in the former Soviet Union there were also clear opportunities for trade (Marsden 2016b). In the case of Turkmenistan, these opportunities arose in relationship to the export of Turkmen oil – a source of international interest at the time, hence the visit by Taliban officials and American oil dealers to the country in the mid-1990s. Afghan Turkmen were significant to the Turkmen government because of their ability to organise the transport of the commodity to Afghanistan, as well as its sale. Indeed, during these years the Turkmen government itself supported attempts to fashion a global Turkmen diasporic identity and through this loyalty to the newly independent Turkmen state. It organised for example an annual World Turkmen Congress meeting to which individuals identified as ethnically Turkmen and resident in various countries within and beyond Asia were invited. By the mid-2000s the Turkmenistan state appeared however to have adopted more restrictive policy on the activities of Turkmen-identifying Afghans within its boundaries. During the mid-2000s, most of the established Turkmen traders of Afghan citizenship who were based in Turkmenistan were deported from the country to Afghanistan. Deportations were often framed by the government of Turkmenistan as accusations of involvement in narcotic smuggling. The Turkmen state also expelled Afghan Turkmen who had cooperated with its intelligence agency in the surveillance of Afghan traders formerly based in the country.

The restriction of access to Turkmenistan by traders from Afghanistan came at a historical juncture during which new commercial opportunities were opening in Afghanistan, largely as a result of the post 11 September 2001 intervention by the USA and its NATO allies. Traders previously based in Turkmenistan were in a unique position to supply NATO forces with precious resources, such as petrol and aeroplane fuel. Others used their contacts with government officials, customs offices, intelligence agents, merchants, and bazaar-owners in Turkmenistan and Central Asia more generally to facilitate the transportation of NATO goods along the so-called Northern Supply Lines. These routes involved the transportation of goods from the Baltic port of Riga, through the Russian Federation, and then along a series of routes through the Muslim-majority states of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kirghizstan, and Tajikistan). The ability of transporters to move goods through these locales quickly and sustaining limited losses to thieves and corrupt officials en route were highly valued by the international logistic companies contracted by NATO. At the time of the withdrawal of the bulk of NATO forces stationed in Afghanistan in 2014, these transporters once again facilitated the international organisation by assisting in the transport of their hardware out of the country. In addition to engaging in such logistical activities, some traders who had made money in Turkmenistan in the 1990s opened banks in Afghanistan; many others took the capital they had earned in Turkmenistan out of Afghanistan and to the UAE.

As is the case with many other present-day Asian trading networks in the contemporary era (e.g. Ho 2017; Stephan-Emmrich 2017), the importance of the UAE to the internationalisation of the activities of Afghanistan's Central Asian émigré families cannot be underestimated. Furthermore, even outside of Central Asia, the traders recognised that it was pragmatically expedient to emphasise ethnic identities that reflected the political

dynamics of post-Soviet Central Asia. The nature of Afghan Turkmen trading practices in the city are noteworthy in that they combined the traditional role of commission agent/transporter with that of service provider/*mehmon saray* (guesthouse) manager for visiting merchants from the post-Soviet Republic of Turkmenistan. From the mid-2000s onwards, ethnically Turkmen traders from Afghanistan opened offices in the Emirate of Sharjah that facilitated the trading visits of customers from Turkmenistan. According to most Turkmen of Afghan citizenship, Turkmen from Turkmenistan are not naturally gifted traders, thanks to the influence of years of Soviet rule, and so therefore need the assistance of expert traders during their purchasing trips to the UAE. Afghan Turkmen could play this role naturally because both of their ability to communicate in Turkmen, and their expertise in the field of trade. Thus, the Afghan Turkmen established a 'system': Turkmenistan visitors were received at airports in the UAE, before being taken to the trading offices or *mehmon saray* (guesthouses) of the Afghan Turkmen (mostly in Sharjah where housing is cheaper than neighbouring Dubai), where they were fed and accommodated. The Afghan Turkmen also provided their professional services as purchasers of commodities, as well as the transporters of these goods to Turkmenistan (mostly overland using the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan border posts of Turgundi and/or Aqinah). From the way in which the Afghan Turkmen traders describe the system it was both comprehensive (the visitors from Turkmenistan placed themselves in the hands of their hosts from arrival to departure) and also profitable. Profits were so good indeed that Turkmen Afghan families based in Pakistan (mostly in the cities of Lahore and Peshawar where they were involved in the manufacture and trade of Turkmen carpets) decided to move to the UAE during this period to open 'trading offices'.

The UAE's status as a sustainable site of trade for these families was relatively short-lived. This type of trading activity faced a major setback in or around 2012 when the government of Turkmenistan imposed new duties on imported vehicles, the commodity that most people from the country had travelled to the UAE in order to purchase. As a result, the trading activities of Turkmen in Dubai quickly dried up. In the face of these changes several traders moved their operations from the UAE to Yiwu. In Yiwu they opened transport companies that once again sought to attract custom from their co-ethnics from across the border in Turkmenistan. In the face of rising costs in Dubai and the easy access in Yiwu to 'commodities of daily use' (souvenirs, gifts, kitchenware, electrical items, hardware, bags and suitcases, etc.), more traders and shopkeepers from Turkmenistan had started to travel to the city to purchase goods from 2010 onwards (according to a senior Yiwu municipal government official with whom I have spoken there was an unexpected surge in the trade between Yiwu and Turkmenistan in 2016).

There are Turkmen citizens who run transport agencies in Yiwu. Yet during fieldwork I saw how traders from the country regularly employ Afghan Turkmen during their business activities in the city. Why do traders from Turkmenistan use the 'services' of Afghan Turkmen in China as they had done previously in Dubai? It was now in the interest of visiting traders from Turkmenistan to work with Afghan Turkmen for two reasons. Firstly, traders from Turkmenistan are frequently said to 'encounter problems' from their government and its security agencies if they are out of the country for substantial periods of time, thus making it difficult for Turkmenistan nationals to establish shipping companies in China. Secondly, building partnerships with émigré Turkmen from Afghanistan resolved some of the issues that traders from Turkmenistan faced in terms of international cash



transfers. In 2016, in the face of growing financial insecurity caused by international sanctions on the Russia Federation and the falling price of oil globally, the Turkmenistan government enforced strict controls on currency exchange, especially the movement of US dollars out of the country. In the face of these controls, suppliers in China, as well as transporters and trading companies, complained in the spring of 2016 that the bills of their Turkmenistan customers went unpaid for months. In Northern Afghanistan in October 2016, I met émigré Turkmen traders (based in Afghanistan) who were seeking to send relatives to Ashgabat (Turkmenistan's capital) to open 'trading offices'. One of the traders' brother was working for a company in Yiwu: the companies sent commodities on credit to Turkmenistan from China (my friend had recently exported a container load of glass bottles for vodka) yet rather than being paid in dollars, oil would be exported to Afghanistan from Turkmenistan.<sup>9</sup> The importance of barter for trading relations during the early post-Soviet period is widely documented (e.g. Seabright 2000). Its significance to the economies of countries such as Turkmenistan today suggest that far from being a trading *modus operandi* that is turned to in hard times, barter is a durable element of the region's economies as well as of its people's modes of maintaining cross-border relations and inter-Asian connections (cf. Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992).

### Supplying the Hajjis – Northern Afghan merchants in Saudi Arabia and Turkey

Many of the traders explored above remained in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s, and, indeed, were aligned to the pro-Soviet People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA): the positions they occupied in the PDPA and the Afghan state in the 1980s afforded them access to networks and actors critical for their commercial activities in Turkmenistan during the 1990s and early 2000s. By contrast, many of the traders explored in what follows left Afghanistan in the early 1980s and assiduously cultivate themselves as being merchants with no interest in Afghanistan's politics or indeed in the commercial opportunities it offers. Most of these families left Afghanistan having been labelled 'feudal' by the communist government and told that their property would be confiscated. Many also simultaneously feared that anti-government mujahidin groups would compel their male children to fight against the invading Red Army. These traders initially moved from Afghanistan to Pakistan: hundreds of families established homes in cities (notably Peshawar and Lahore), eventually establishing workshops in which carpets with Turkmen designs were produced, and then sold to Pakistani, Afghan, and international carpet dealers. Other families – shortly after their arrival in Pakistan in the 1980s – procured Pakistani travel documents that allowed them to travel to Saudi Arabia on working visas. For all such people, the lengthy process of obtaining residency in Saudi Arabia was expensive, complex and drawn out – most Central Asian émigré s in the 1980s who travelled to Saudi Arabia used the documents that they had acquired in Pakistan to obtain residency. In later years this posed major problems when they wished to travel between Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan or if they required Afghan documents for processing visas and residency in third countries (especially Turkey). Those who did not enter Saudi Arabia on Pakistani passports tended to hold specially designated hajj visas; they then overstayed these, often for several years, until they were deported to Afghanistan or found a 'route' to gaining access to Saudi residency documents. Normally,



some family members have entered the country on a working visa while others are over-stayers on a hajj visa.

Most of the traders say that they were initially involved in small scale commercial activities in Jeddah and other cities, buying, for example, inexpensive goods from commodity wholesalers and then selling them at street stalls in the holy cities of Mecca or Medina. Successful traders rented shops in Mecca and Madinah to cover the period of the hajj pilgrimage season when profit margins are at their highest. The Central Asian émigré traders from Afghanistan also successfully entered the restaurant market in Saudi Arabia, opening cafes and eateries selling a version of Turkmen palaw referred to in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Countries more generally as Bukhary rice. They also filled other niches, such as the gathering, packaging and transportation of dates.

As with the Afghan Turkmen traders who mediated Turkmenistan's relationship with the UAE and then China, traders from Northern Afghanistan in Saudi Arabia increasingly positioned themselves as middleman agents between Saudi Arabia and other Asian regions. On the one hand, this wave of migrants to Saudi Arabia publicly emphasised the Bukharan aspects of their identities, branding the goods they brought from China with names such as 'Bukhara' and 'Turkistan'. In so doing, the traders aligned themselves with historic migrants from Central Asia to Saudi Arabia who now mostly hold Saudi citizenship. On the other hand, the traders actively built on their existing relationships and commercial activities. From the mid-1980s onwards, increasing numbers of Muslims from Central Asian and the Caucasus began to travel to Saudi Arabia for hajj. During the hajj season, Central Asian émigré s from Northern Afghanistan who were based in Jeddah, as well as Mecca and Madinah, sourced valuable antiques (e.g. embroidered cloth, carpet fragments, and jewellery) from the visiting pilgrims. These items were then sold in shops they owned in the Kingdom, and that were popular amongst wealthy Saudi families, as well as the country's international expatriate community. Émigré Central Asians, moreover, are also active in the global antique market, owning retail and wholesale businesses in Istanbul's Grand Bazaar, for instance: valuable items sources in Saudi Arabia were also moved internationally.

A second source of such international relationships was the presence of a commercially active community of families from Northern Afghanistan in Turkey. The Turkish government resettled thousands of Turkic-speaking Afghans (mostly from Pakistan's refugee camps) in the mid-1980s.<sup>10</sup> These refugees were settled across the country, but especially in the South-East (e.g. in Hatay, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa), East (Van), and North (Tokat) and in Istanbul (Zeytinburnu). Ethno-linguistic identity was an important criterion used by the Turkish authorities to identify families considerable suitable for relocation in Turkey. Against this backdrop, most communities of Afghans in Turkey identify themselves as Uzbek, Turkmen, Kazakh or Kirghiz, have established community associations (*anjoman*, *karnak*, *dernigi*) in relationship to such categories, and have also sought to form broader collective identities around the notion of 'Afghan Turk'. Today, men who migrated to Turkey as teenage boys during openly reflect on the shift's in their personal and collective identities, as well as the language preferences of their families underwent during this period. One man, now in his early forties, told me that while he identified himself as being an Uzbek his family had spoken Farsi with one another in their home region of Takhar in Northern Afghanistan: it was only having migrated to Turkey that his Uzbek language improved (*Uzbek qawi shud*).

These communities initially found employment in Turkish owned stitching and clothing sweatshops and factories, but eventually used skills they had acquired in Afghanistan and Pakistan's refugee camps – the making of suede clothing and carpets in particular – to produce goods for international export. The clothes they produced supplied the markets of the former Soviet Union, while prayer mats were predominantly produced for sale in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Bukharan émigré traders who were based in Saudi Arabia having initially made their money in trading goods purchased within the Kingdom from the 1990s increasingly sourced commodities in Turkey. During the 1990s and early 2000s, a handful of Saudi-based traders opened factories and sweatshops in Turkey. Traders based in Saudi Arabia have additionally told me that until the onset of the war in Syria, they would also travel from Jeddah to Aleppo to purchase machine-made carpets. One Jeddah-based trader that I met in Istanbul in July 2016 told me that he now travels to Jordan to buy carpets from a merchant he knew in Aleppo who moved his carpet-weaving machines out of Syria. Afghan émigré Turkmens working in Istanbul's Grand Bazaar have also forged business partnerships with Syrian jewellers who have relocated to Istanbul: Turkmen traders provide semi-precious stones, and direct market in their shops for the jewellery produced by their Syrian partners.

Finally, in the early 2000s several traders closed their factories in Turkey in the context of rising costs and competition from Chinese machine-made carpets (including *joy namaz* or prayer mats). By the time of my fieldwork in Yiwu in 2016, not only were traders exporting to Jeddah deemed to be amongst the most successful Afghan merchants in the city, several Jeddah-based trading families had established themselves in Yiwu, running transport companies, commissioning agent services, as well as owning restaurants. In addition to carpets and prayer mats, the traders also export t-shirts and Arab-style clothing from China to Saudi Arabia. In 2017 in Istanbul, I also met a Jeddah-based trader who exported children's toys from China to Saudi Arabia yet who was in the process of opening an office and shop in Istanbul's Istoc wholesale market.

Hajji Abdullah, for example, is a trader in his late forties who is the son of a Central Asian émigré family that were based in the Northern town of Aqchah from the 1920s until 1983, when they moved to Pakistan, before eventually shifting to Jeddah in the late 1980s. Over the course of 2016 I met Haji Abdullah in Yiwu (during the course of a purchasing trip he made in mid-June), Zeytinburnu (during a visit he made to the city connected to his attending a relative's wedding party in July), and Jeddah (the city in which he is 'permanently' based and was awaiting a shipment of goods to arrive from China in December). Hajji Abdullah owned a yarn factory in Turkey for some years in the 2000s but this closed (at a considerable financial loss) and he turned his attention instead to importing goods to Saudi Arabia from China. The Hajji recognises that there are benefits to purchasing goods in China: 'hajjis buy lots of gifts for their relatives and they don't care about the quality only the price'. Importantly, then the specific nature of the business activities of traders in the Arabian Peninsula, and the clientele whom they serve, means that they do not face the same difficulties that are faced by merchants working in other settings, and caused by the supply of sub-standard commodities. Indeed, Hajji Abdullah, exports to Jeddah Arab-style tunics (*thobe*) that are made in Yiwu by a company that employs men interned in Chinese jails as tailors. Like other traders, he also exports higher quality Turkish products to Saudi Arabia, especially clothing and carpets, from Turkey, and, increasingly from China. Traders based in Jeddah involved in these activities talk openly about the other merchant

groups with whom they compete and the factors that have enabled them to achieve the success they have. In December 2016, for example, I was told by several traders that their fiercest competitors were traders from Yemen, who also travel to Yiwu to purchase small commodities. It was also remarked to me that an opening had been created for Afghan traders in Jeddah because of a downturn of relations between Saudi Arabia and Yemen during the first Gulf War (Yemen opposed the US-led intervention), and it was this rift that opened a niche for Afghan/Central Asian émigré merchants.

Importantly, the shift to Chinese production has not led traders to remove their capital from Turkey – those with citizenship or residency instead have become increasingly active in the real estate trade, sourcing property most especially for wealthy and middle-class Afghans who buy houses in Istanbul with the aim of securing residency permits for their families. This path to Turkish residency and even citizenship is deployed by many Afghans who made money in Afghanistan during the 2000s and fear for the security of the country and the families, especially after the 2014 withdrawal of NATO forces.

### Perpetual Nomads?

The history of this mobile society made-up of long-term Central Asian émigré s who trade across West, Central and East Asia, and have established centres of community life in two of the historic ‘choke points’ of the Ottoman Empire (Jeddah and Istanbul), positions itself in complex ways to Afghanistan. Unlike in the traders who travelled backwards and forwards between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, a substantial majority of the Saudi-based men I have spoken to say they have never returned to Afghanistan after having left in the early 80s. They explain this by saying it is because they were already refugees in Afghanistan when they left the country for Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. There is also the general perception that officials in the Afghan state were ambiguous in the ways in which they treated the Central Asian emigres: if many elders appreciate the land afforded them by Afghan officials, others claim emigres faced difficulties in the country because of delays they faced in receiving Afghan national identity documents (*tazkira*) (e.g. Nasiri and Khalili 2013, 231). As a result, I am told, while they felt attachment to Northern Afghanistan as a homeland (*watan*) that arose from its status as their place of birth (*joy-e tawallud*), then their political commitments to the state were more contested.

Life in Saudi Arabia has also provided the opportunity for these traders and the communities to which they belong to explore their own histories of transregional connectedness. Saudi Arabia, operates the *kafil* system (a Saudi citizen is required to be a partner of the business activities of a resident foreigner): some of my informants have told me that their *kafil* are third generation descendants of 1920 émigré s from the Emirate of Bukhara.<sup>11</sup> These people, they say, have ‘become Arab’ but are still more trustworthy partners than Saudi citizens without a shared Central Asian heritage. One trader, a Farsi-speaker originally from the Samangan province in Northern Afghanistan, told me that he owns a house in Istanbul, and that in the summer of 2016 he had allowed his originally Kashgari *kafil* to use for two weeks. Four weeks later, when we met, the trader and his family was staying in a hotel because the *kafil* had decided to prolong his stay in Turkey. Following Engseng Ho, it is helpful to think of these dispersed traders as forming a ‘partial grouping’ (Ho 2014, 2017). Ho uses the concept of ‘partial grouping’ to refer to a group which is geographically dispersed, connected to counterpart

communities across long distances, and formed in relationship to ongoing circulations and exchanges over time. The case of Afghanistan's Turkmen traders in Jeddah and Turkey brings attention to the ways in which the scattering of these traders has also facilitated circulations of people, ideas, and things over extended periods of time.

The more successful traders have increasingly fashioned the Zeytinburnu neighbourhood of Istanbul as a node for their commercial and affective lives. They come to Istanbul in the summer to escape the heat of Jeddah, as well as to order carpets and clothes that are made in Turkey to be delivered to Saudi Arabia on time for the great hajj pilgrimage. Many also attend or organise the weddings of relatives who were resettled in Turkey in the 1980s, preferring to organise such events in Turkey as opposed to either Jeddah or their home towns in Afghanistan. Indeed, several of the Afghan traders I have talked with successfully sought to acquire Turkish citizenship in the 1990s and 2000s often purchasing property in Turkey to assist their cases.<sup>12</sup> Holding a Turkish passport they say, raises their status in Saudi Arabia: if they are to fall foul of the law they are likely to receive better treatment if they are Turkish citizens than if living in Saudi Arabia solely on a residency permit connected to a Pakistani or Afghan document.

For some traders, Turkish citizenship confers a national identity that better reflects their collective histories than that of 'Afghan'. Perhaps more importantly, though, possessing Turkish citizenship affords the children of these trading families access to higher education in Turkey, something such families face severe barriers to in Saudi Arabia: 'when our children finish class 12', it is often remarked to me, 'we have no choice but to bring them into the shop or warehouse and start them trading'. For many others, indeed, the role played by Turkey in their personal and collective political affiliations and identities is a sensitive topic that is best approached in the pragmatic manner that has characterised their earlier migratory experiences. There is plenty of discussion in and amongst these families about the extent to which being Turkish genuinely assures them of an 'authentic' identity. In one house in which I stayed in Mazar-i Sharif in 2016 and again in 2017 for example I saw a lively debate between a Turkmen Afghan who had moved his family to Istanbul in 2011 and a Turkmen trader who lived in Afghanistan with his family though frequently travelled to the Central Asian countries for commercial purposes. The Afghanistan-based trader was opposed to Turkmen families leaving Afghanistan on the grounds that they were buying into an exclusive form of Turkish national identity. He argued, instead, that Afghanistan's Turkmen's should be committed to protecting their people's role and history in lands that had been of importance to Turkmen identity for centuries. During an evening of hospitality at the household of a Turkmen merchant in Riyadh, I witnessed a similar debate between elders in the community who argued that their people naturally belonged to Turkey and others who were suspicious of Turkish policy towards Central Asia's Turkic-language speakers. A cause of this suspicion lies in a sense that while Turkish officials might speak of Central Asians as their 'brothers' they continue to treat such groups as sources of cheap labour or hard capital.

The networks that facilitate the flows of commodities from China to Saudi Arabia, as well as between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, are informed by several generations of mobility that is connected to both trade and political displacement. These traders have thus played an active role in seeking to establish and sustain sites of familial and affective life that are less visible in the other 'Afghan' trading networks emanating from Yiwu, such as Dari-speaking traders from North Eastern Afghanistan involved in the sale of counterfeit

up-market mountain clothing brands, as well as gemstones, or the ethnically mixed former socialist officials pivotal to the trade in small commodities between China and the former Soviet Union (Marsden 2017). For many of the traders who are active across Saudi Arabia, China and Turkey questions of identity and belonging, as well as strategic moves concerning how to find permanent homes for their families, co-habit with pragmatic commercial considerations and are addressed on a day-to-day level. Ho's concept of 'mobile society' is helpful in the analysis of this particular group of traders because of the sustained forms of mobility that characterise their social dynamics across a range of historical periods.

## Conclusion

Anthropologists and scholars in related disciplines have for long been aware of the role that Afghans play in the Gulf's labour market (e.g. Nichols 2008). There has been less recognition however of the role that the country's people have played in the commercial dynamics of the region. Nor have scholars sufficiently recognised the critical role that traders from Afghanistan are playing in connecting the markets of the Gulf to other Asian settings, ranging from Istanbul in Turkey, to Ashgabat in Turkmenistan, and Yiwu in China. Future work in the field of Inter-Asian connections might seek similarly therefore to not merely identify and describe transregional axes of interaction (e.g. the Indian Ocean, West East-Central-West Asian connections) but also theorise the dynamics whereby these coalesce, such as in Istanbul and Jeddah. If, indeed, much of the literature on the nature of inter-Asian has focused on the ways in which oceans do or do not foster universalisms and religion as the cultural-moral ground of exchange and interaction, my consideration in this article of the ways in which Afghan overland routes interact both with pan-Turkic ideals and provisioning the hajj with religious commodities suggest the possibility for more studies of the role played by territorial trading groups in the emergence of expansive identities (see Anderson this volume).

By focusing on specific, multiple, mobile 'partial communities' that are distributed across Asia yet interconnected with one another across both space and time, I have also suggested the form of an account of thick trans-regionalism. Analytically, the concept of partial societies is helpful for such an endeavour because it disaggregates the phenomenon under investigation into a series of movements, adjustments and sites of interaction. Building on a parallel body of literature that brings attention to the pragmatic concerns of border-crossing intellectuals in early twentieth century West Asia, I have also sought to describe shifts in the identity formations of this mobile society and assess how these relate to transforming geopolitical initiatives and circumstances. Rather than having to assume a single site or moment of dispersion as necessitated by the concept of diaspora, the notion of partial community enables an exploration of how mobile actors identify their backgrounds, identities and collective histories in changing ways according to the varying circumstances in which they find themselves. As a trader in his late thirties who identified himself as Turkmen born in Afghanistan to the children of émigré s from Central Asia, raised in Saudi Arabia, and a frequent visitor to Turkey, remarked to me after dropping me at Riyadh International Airport, 'let's see what happens next, we are basically a nomadic people, and while my elders are now putting their faith in Erdoğan and describing themselves as the original Turks, when things inevitably change in Turkey, especially in the field of business, I'm sure we'll start moving elsewhere, just God knows where!'

## Notes

1. I use the term *émigré* in this article in convention with other literature on Afghanistan's Central Asians (e.g. Shahrani 2001) because of the recognition it gives to the multifaceted aspects of their various stages of movement and dispersals in a manner that more one-dimensional terms used in migration studies (such as emigrant and refugee) do not afford.
2. Such forms of commercial activity were also of critical importance to the development of other of Central Asia's polities: see Levi (2017) for a discussion of the role played by Xinjiang merchants in the fortunes of Khoqand.
3. Turkmen tribes traded slaves in Russia and Central Asia (e.g. Eden 2016), though his is not an aspect of their commercial pasts which has been broached with me.
4. Kane (2015) refers to a Russian official who visited the Hejaz in 1895 referring to a 'tight-knit Turkistani *émigré* community living and working in Jeddah, Mecca and Medina' (Kane 2016, 79).
5. According to Spooner (1986, 216) the production of 'Bukharan' carpets for Western markets 'ceased' between 1930 and the 1960s. The fate of the fur trade during these years is unclear.
6. These families themselves make distinctions between Turkmen families who moved to Afghanistan after the 1920s, and those who have been based in the country since before the migrations of the early twentieth century. In the context of Afghanistan's contemporary politics, in which ethnicised debates about which communities might refer to themselves as 'truly' Afghan are pervasive, the making of such distinctions is invested with considerable political potency (Shahrani 2001; Shalinsky 1993).
7. On Afghanistan's Jewish communities, see Koplik 2003.
8. See Edgar 2006.
9. Rogers 2014 discusses 'petrobarter' and the insights this offers into understanding 'universalising imaginaries' of monetised exchange.
10. Afghan itinerants (mostly pilgrims and merchants) claimed multiple forms of imperial jurisdictional subjecthood, including of the Ottomans, the Russian Empire, and British India. See Ahmed 2016; Can 2012, 2016; Stephens 2014.
11. See (Balci 2003) on Saudi Arabia's Central Asian *émigré* community.
12. Statistics suggest that Afghans fall within the top four list of countries in terms of acquisition of property in Istanbul after Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Russia (Ashar Al-Awsat, 2016). Afghan Central Asian *émigré* traders in Jeddah are aware of the extent to which their community's capital is tied up in Istanbul. After being informed of a bomb blast that killed several people in Istanbul, a trader in a shop I was visiting in Jeddah left to go home and follow events on the TV. A further trader said to me, 'don't worry about him, he's just bought a property in Istanbul and is worried if its value will fall. If there is a bomb attack in his country of birth – Afghanistan – he doesn't so much as batter an eyelid'.

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